

Stonebound

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City Beneath

Beneath the earth, hidden from the sun and unknown to many who tread the surface above, sprawls a vast underground city carved directly into the stone of the mountain's roots. The city descends through multiple levels, with narrow passageways connecting larger chambers that serve as homes, workshops, and gathering halls. Ventilation shafts tunnel up through the stone like the arteries of the earth, and round stone doors, perfectly balanced, can be rolled in place to seal off corridors in times of danger. Cisterns collect fresh water through ingenious engineering, and communal spaces are lit by lanterns of everburning crystal, glowing softly in hues of amber and sapphire.



Here, amid the carved halls and age-worn staircases, lives Golar, a master stonemason of modest fame. His dwelling is nestled within the second deepest level of the city, known among locals as Throgar's Belly, where the stone is densest and best suited for precision carving. Though made of stone like all else around it, Golar's home is a place of warmth and care, with carved lintels above his door bearing runes of welcome and protection. Inside, the walls are smooth and decorated with reliefs of mountains, anvils, and great forges.

His home consists of five chambers, each serving its purpose with quiet dignity. The stonemason's workroom is a place of dust and focus, with tools laid out in orderly fashion, unfinished sculptures standing silently in corners, and shelves of rare stone samples collected from his excursions into the deep veins. His sleeping quarters are simple, with a thick mattress stuffed with moss and wool resting on a carved bedframe, and a low hearth providing steady heat.

The kitchen shows signs of Golar's practical habits—stone shelves hold jars of dried meats, pickled roots, and hearty spices. A cauldron hangs over a small fire pit, its soot-darkened bottom a testament to countless stews. The living room, however, is the heart of the home. Wooden furniture, a rarity belowground, has been crafted with care: a wide chair with padded cushions, a long bench for visitors, and a table of polished oak, likely brought from the forests above.

Tucked behind a stone arch is his small library. The room holds shelves stacked with old tomes bound in cracked leather and cloth, some in Dwarvish, others in Elvish and Common. Golar reads often, especially about engineering, ancient stoneworking, and the myths of the surface world.

He is not alone in this vast city. Ten thousand dwarves call it home, a community bound by tradition, craft, and kinship. Above them, in the light of day, sprawls a surface city built atop the mountain's crown. There, elves, halflings, humans, and dwarves coexist, trading and mingling, living lives that are as open and airy as the underground life is solid and enduring. Yet few of them know of the quiet majesty that lies beneath their feet, or of the master stonemason Golar, shaping the bones of the earth with his chisels and dreams.



Golar comes from a long line of stonemasons, his blood etched with the rhythm of hammer against chisel and the silent wisdom of stone. He is the fifth generation in his family to bear the trade, each son taught by his father in the quiet tradition of craft passed down from father to son, shaped by calloused hands and murmured secrets. Many of the techniques he uses—specific cuts for certain veins of granite, the method of tempering tools with subterranean salts, or how to listen for faults in the rock by the echo of a tap—are not written in any book but lived through muscle and memory. His lineage, though rich in knowledge, has never been

wealthy. Golar lives with the quiet burden of his modest means, working each day to maintain not only his livelihood but the dignity of his ancestors.

The home he occupies now is the same dwelling that once belonged to his great-grandparents. Its stone walls are familiar and aged, each corner heavy with old voices and forgotten laughter. He has never left it for long; even when he ventures above ground or deep into the mines, he returns to these five rooms, to the scent of old stone and pipe smoke, to the soft glow of crystal light warming the shelves of his little library.

Though a stonemason by heart and trade, Golar is no stranger to hard labor. At times, when commissions run dry or coin grows thin, he descends even deeper below the city to work the mines—brutal places where stone yields not art but raw material, and where the air grows thick with dust and sweat. There, among pickaxe swings and shouted orders, he toils beside other dwarves who share in silence the weight of survival.

On other days, Golar climbs the winding tunnels to the surface and walks the streets of the great city above. This city, known as Felhedrin, was founded centuries ago by an alliance of elves, dwarves, and men after the breaking of the eastern warbands. Once a fortress built to keep invaders at bay, Felhedrin grew into a sprawling metropolis, surrounded by forested hills and guarded by ancient walls. Now home to over a hundred thousand souls, it is a place of trade, learning, and constant noise. The districts of Felhedrin burst with life—marketplaces teeming with goods from a dozen lands, taverns roaring with laughter and the clinking of mugs, and towers that pierce the sky, far too high for Golar's liking.

Despite his fear of heights, he endures the surface with a kind of resigned determination. He often works jobs above—stone restoration, fortification repairs, or custom commissions from wealthy clients who want a dwarven touch in their homes. He spends his evenings in dark taverns, where the floors are sticky with spilled ale and the smoke from a hundred pipes curls in the rafters. Golar drinks deeply, smokes often, and watches quietly. He speaks little unless necessary, but when he does, his word is iron. He is known as a dwarf who won't cheat or lie, and he expects the same in return.

In his dwelling, locked away in a large wooden chest reinforced with iron bands, he keeps his old armor. A chainmail shirt, scuffed but serviceable, a squat iron helmet engraved with his clan's insignia, a short sword, a shield with a cracked edge, and worn gloves, boots, belt—his full kit, waiting for a time when war or danger might call again. Golar is a skilled fighter, hardened in his youth and tested in street brawls and mine skirmishes. He holds the strength and grit of a warrior, though he rarely boasts of it. Violence is a tool he neither shuns nor relishes—he uses it like a pickaxe, when needed, and only then.

Golar walks the line of self-interest and loyalty. He is not cruel, but not bound by ideals. He respects those who earn it, keeps his promises, and works hard. But his loyalty can be bought, and his patience has limits. The world has taught him that honor means little without coin or strength to protect it, and so he lives by his own rules—quiet, watchful, and unshakable, like the stone he carves.

The dwelling hums with the low breath of firelight and the quiet crackle of torches. Golar stands in the kitchen, hunched slightly from years of labor, his thick black beard bristling as he moves with deliberate ease. He lifts the iron lid off a soot-darkened cauldron and peers

into its steaming contents. Tossing in a handful of chopped root vegetables and salted meat, he stirs the thickening broth with a wooden ladle, the scent of simmering herbs and onions rising into the warm air. The hearth glows steadily behind him, its flames licking softly at the stone, casting shadows that dance across carved walls.

From beneath the counter, he pulls a stout earthen mug and steps over to a barrel set snugly in the corner. He works the spigot with a practiced hand, filling the mug with a dark, heady ale. Without ceremony, he tips it back and drains it in a single, greedy swallow, finishing with a thunderous croak that echoes briefly in the narrow hallways of stone. He wipes his mouth on his forearm, grabs his clay pipe from a notch on the wall, and strikes a small piece of flint to light it. A curl of thick smoke snakes up toward the ceiling as he takes a deep drag and exhales slowly, eyes half-lidded in brief, ale-warmed contentment.

He walks through the short corridor into his small library, the air growing stiller and scented with vellum, wax, and pipe smoke. The torches burn low on the walls, their flickering light barely reaching the shelves lined with heavy tomes, some ancient and brittle. He sets the pipe in his mouth and sits at the stone desk, opening a leather-bound volume—its pages yellowed, its cover marked with dwarven script too old for many to read. He studies drawings of arch keystones, weight distributions, joinery patterns, and engraved cross-sections of vault structures. With care, he begins sketching designs of his own with a quill dipped in black ink, the sharp scent of iron gall bleeding into the air. His notes are tight and methodical, annotations written in a terse script only he understands.

Wind moans softly through one of the ventilation shafts above, carved in spiraling flutes to reduce the echo. Wood beams from the surface city support parts of the ceiling, charred and resin-slick from old treatments. Each flame in his home is real and hungry—fed by wax or wood hauled down by traders or kin.



Among the clutter of his desk lies a sealed letter, creased and smudged at the corners. He breaks the wax with a thumb and reads the message, written in the town guard's square, practical hand. The northern watchtower—some stonework giving way, corners crumbling. Materials already delivered. Work needed soon. Payment fair. He reads it twice, grunts, then sets it aside.

“Fine then,” he mutters, his voice gravel. “Guess I’ll earn my next mug swingin’ hammers for some half-blind watchman who don’t know granite from goblin spit.”

At dawn, Golar is up before the city stirs. He straps on a thick leather apron, stuffs a wrapped loaf and dried jerky into a satchel, then secures his tool kit—a heavy box of steel and stone tools, each with its own story—before leaving his dwelling. He climbs the spiraling tunnelways upward, passing sleepy-eyed dwarves and empty halls lit by fading crystals. When he reaches the surface, the air hits him like a cold slap—sharp and dry.

Outside, the surface city of Felhedrin spreads before him in soft morning light. The mixed architecture of elves, humans, halflings, and dwarves blends oddly but not unpleasantly. Wooden towers, stone bridges, slate roofs, and garden courtyards clash in character but harmonize in use. His mule, a thick-flanked beast named Knuckle, snorts in greeting from the stall. Golar loads the cart, climbs aboard, and cracks the reins.

“Let’s go, you lazy bastard. I got rock that needs my name on it.”

The streets are already stirring with merchants setting up, smiths preparing fires, children chasing stray chickens. Golar eyes the rooftops warily, never liking the height of the buildings. He hunches down behind the cart’s sideboards as Knuckle clops northward through the cobbled roads. As he rides, he speaks aloud to no one in particular, chewing a pipe stem between sentences.

“Stone don’t lie. Stone remembers. These surface folk, they patch and prop like they’re paintin’ over rot. But me—I’ll put her back right. I always do. Same way me da did, and his da before. Ain’t ‘cause I love it. It’s ‘cause I know how.”

He pauses as the watchtower comes into view, a grey fang rising near the northern wall. A scaffold is already half-built around its base, and a pile of fresh stone sits covered with canvas nearby. He spits over the side of the cart and grins behind his beard.

“Right then, old girl. Let’s make you proud again.”

Golar steps off the cart with a grunt, brushing wood chips and dust from his thick gloves. The early morning light glints off his leather apron as he swings the heavy toolbox onto one shoulder and trudges toward the base of the northern watchtower. Its stone façade, once proud, now shows the sag of time—cracked mortar lines, corners chipped by wind and neglect. A scaffold of rough timber surrounds the structure, manned by a few surface laborers, most of them human. They nod as he arrives, giving the dwarf his space. They’ve worked with his kind before. Few words. Hard hands.

Golar sets down his tools, opens the iron-latched box, and begins selecting chisels, a mason’s hammer, plumb line, and calipers. He snorts softly as he looks up at the tower.

“Looks worse up close. Patchwork job last time—amateurs,” he mutters.

He makes his way up the scaffold, its planks creaking under his boots. At the height of the damaged section, he runs his gloved hand over the weathered stone, brushing moss from the grooves. He taps it with his hammer and listens—solid here, hollow there. His eyes narrow. He measures the cavity with practiced precision, murmuring numbers to himself.

“Eight of ‘em... four full spans, two half-cuts, a twin-corner lock.” He tucks a piece of parchment against the wall and sketches out the cuts. “A day’s work, if the lads don’t get lazy.”

Descending the tower, he selects a broad granite slab from the pile. Kneeling, he braces it and begins his craft. The hammer rings out sharp and constant, steel on stone. Chips fly, dust rises, and sweat beads beneath his beard. He works with the instinctive rhythm of generations—tap, pause, strike, shift. He measures again, adjusts, chisels the edge into a perfect lip to match the tower’s existing cut. After hours of precise shaping, the stone is ready.

“Oi, lads,” he calls over his shoulder, standing and stretching his back with a groan. “Let’s get this bastard skyward.”

Two workers, both human, approach with the pulley rope.

“Damn, that’s a solid piece,” one says, adjusting his grip.

“Solid is the idea, friend,” Golar grunts. “Don’t drop it, or I’ll carve the next one outta your backside.”

The men chuckle and lash the stone securely. They signal up. The winch creaks and groans as men above haul the rope, raising the block inch by inch. Golar climbs beside it, watching every motion, hand ready in case it swings wrong.

“Slow. Slower! You want to dent it before it even sets?” he growls.

At the top, the stone is steadied and laid beside the gaping cavity where the old block has already been loosened. Golar levers the worn stone out, cradling it onto a timber sled. He waves for the mortar bucket.

“Bring the clay!”

A young halfling hands it over—thick, ochre clay with crushed sand, already mixed.

“Good mix,” Golar mutters, testing it between his fingers. “Won’t crack in the cold.”

He packs it into the cavity with a wide trowel, layer by layer, then signals for the new stone. The men lift it, edge-first, and Golar guides it into the space with careful hands. He taps it gently with a mallet, watching the mortar squeeze slightly at the seams.



“Just right. Like a tooth in the jaw.”

He smooths the edges, runs a damp cloth along the joins, and seals the last gap with a careful press of clay. He steps back, squints at his work, and nods.

“One down.”

Back at the base, he begins shaping the next. His hammer swings with slow, tireless power.

Between blocks, he takes a short break, sitting with a cloth-wrapped bundle of bread and jerky. The others gather nearby.

“Damn, dwarf, you don’t mess around,” says the lanky man who had helped with the pulley. “You ever sleep?”

Golar chews and replies through a mouthful of bread, “Sleep’s for priests and poets. I’ll rest when the stone don’t need me.”

Another worker, a broad-shouldered woman with scars on her arms, sits beside him. “You from that place under the mountain?”

“Aye. Born in stone, shaped by stone, and likely to die under it,” Golar says, tearing off another chunk of food. “Name’s Golar.”

She offers her hand. “Dresa. I’m from the eastern ridge. Used to do wallwork for the council guard. They pay better now?”

“Not unless you like waiting three moons for a pittance,” Golar grunts, then points to the tower. “This here? Worth it. Stone like this, she’s got history. You fix it, it remembers.”

The others nod, falling into a quiet respect.

The day continues. Golar carves, measures, fits, and sets. By late afternoon, four stones are in place, the tower beginning to regain its form. Dust clings to his beard, mortar stains his gloves, but his eyes still shine with focus.

“Four to go,” he says under his breath, running his hand over the next slab. “We’ll have this old girl standing proud again. One stone at a time.”

By the time the sun leans low behind Felhedrin’s spires, casting long golden rays over the northern wall, Golar is working on the final stone. His arms ache with a dull, familiar burn, but his hands remain steady as ever. One by one, the remaining blocks have been cut, measured, hauled up, and fixed into place with care. He works without pause, his only companion the clang of his hammer and the smell of mortar and sweat. Each stone fits snug, flush with the tower’s flanks, locked into place with expert pressure and sealed as tight as the day it was first raised.

By the eighth and final stone, he knows the tower is sound once more. He steps back on the scaffold, gives the wall a firm slap with his palm, and grunts in satisfaction.

“She’ll hold through storm, siege, or dragon breath now.”

But as he begins to descend, a sudden shout breaks the air. One of the human workers, a lad no older than twenty, slips on the narrow stone steps and tumbles with a thud and a cry. Golar is on him in a flash, kneeling beside the groaning form.

“Hold still,” Golar says, voice gravel but calm. “Don’t twist that leg. Might be a break.”

The boy groans, clutching his knee.

“I—I didn’t see the edge...”

“Aye, that’s how it happens.” Golar steadies him, then wraps one thick arm under the lad’s shoulders and lifts him with surprising care. “You’ve still got all your teeth. That’s a start.”

With help from another worker, the boy is eased down to sit on a barrel by the scaffold. Just then, the overseer arrives—a wiry man with a chain of keys jangling at his belt and an iron-banded ledger under one arm.

“You did the job right, dwarf. Clean joins, flush lines, good mortar,” the man says, nodding toward the repaired tower. “Here’s your pay.”

He counts out twenty gold coins into Golar’s gloved palm. Golar inspects them briefly, grunts, and nods.

“Pleasure,” he says curtly, tucking the pouch into his belt. “Keep your lads off the stairs after dusk.”

He loads his tools back into the cart, pats Knuckle the mule on the flank, and climbs up. The cart creaks as it begins its slow roll down the cobbled streets of Felhedrin. Lanterns flicker to life, smoke rises from chimneys, and laughter carries from open windows. As night settles, Golar steers toward the familiar low-roofed tavern with a black iron sign hanging from a beam: *Smith's Wail*.

Outside the tavern, he halts the cart, tosses Knuckle a bundle of hay from the trough, and grumbles, "Don't bite anyone. You've got bad breath."

Inside, the tavern glows with firelight and chatter. Oak beams crisscross the ceiling, and the air is thick with roasted meat, ale, and the wet wool of evening cloaks. The barmaid, a stout woman with flame-red hair and arms like barrels, spots him.

"Well look what the stone dragged in," she calls, grinning.

"Gimme a plate of pork, potatoes, and a mug of something that burns," Golar says, thumping onto a bench near the hearth.

"Coming up, oh fierce master of rocks."

As he waits, he lights his pipe and lets the smoke drift slowly from his nostrils. Around him, the tavern hums with life. At a corner table, an elven minstrel with silver hair quietly tunes a lute. Near the hearth, two dwarves arm wrestle, their fists white-knuckled on a beer-slicked table. A trio of halflings argue about card tricks near the kitchen door, while a cloaked figure in the back observes all in silence, a hood pulled low.

Golar eats with slow satisfaction when the plate arrives. The pork is crisp at the edges, the potatoes soaked in thick gravy. He gulps ale between bites and smokes between gulps. The warmth of food and fire settles in his belly like stone set on a solid base.

Once the plate is scraped clean, he drains the last of his ale and strides up to the bar, fills a second mug, and pours it down in one long, practiced swallow. The mug hits the counter with a wet thunk.

"Another round for the belly forge," he mutters.

As he sits back down, a halfling woman approaches his table. She's got short curly hair, freckles across her nose, and wears a green vest two sizes too big for her, carrying a plate.

"Mind if I sit?" she asks, already pulling out a chair.

"Free stone don't ask permission," Golar replies, waving her in.

She sits and smiles. "Name's Gala. Thought I might get a job here at the *Smith's Wail*, but the barmaid said I'm too short to carry three mugs without wearing 'em."



Golar barks out a laugh. “And I’ve got to swing my legs on these tall chairs like a toddler in a smithy. Life’s full of irony.”

Gala giggles and leans in. “But the food, huh? That pork’s the best in the ward.”

“Aye,” Golar says, tapping his pipe. “Meat’s got bark, not boiled to death. Potatoes taste like someone loved ‘em.”

“I’d marry the cook if I thought she’d take a halfling who burns toast,” Gala says with a wink.

Golar chuckles, watching the firelight flicker over his empty mug. “We all want something warm at the end of the day. Some folk want gold. Me? Just give me a strong ale and a full plate.”

“And maybe good company,” Gala adds, lifting her own mug.

He lifts his pipe in a small salute. “Aye. That too.”

The tavern hums on around them, voices growing louder as tankards empty and firelight deepens into a lazy glow. Golar raises a hand to the barmaid, who grins knowingly and soon brings over two more ales, both dark and frothy, sloshing gently in their thick mugs.

“One for you,” Golar says, pushing a mug toward Gala. “And one for the road that ain’t goin’ anywhere.”

Gala raises it with both hands and takes a hearty gulp, then blinks and sways slightly in her seat.

“By the hills... that’s strong,” she mumbles, setting it down halfway finished. “Feels like someone punched my thoughts.”

Golar smirks and leans back, the bench creaking under his weight.

“You finish your meal?”

Gala nods and wipes her mouth with a napkin twice her size. “Chicken was good. Had a bit of thyme in it. Fancy.”

“So where you from?” Golar asks, tapping the rim of his mug. “You don’t sound like a city halfling.”

“I’m not,” she says with a smile, resting her cheek in one hand. “I grew up in a river hamlet called Arlor’s Drift. Just watermills, reeds, and a hundred cousins. My da’s a ferryman. Mum’s a baker. I was the only one who hated boats. I wanted taverns, towns, stories. So I left.” She shrugs. “Came here a year ago with three silver, a lopsided pan flute, and a pair of shoes that didn’t match.”

Golar chuckles. “You did well. The shoes match now.”

“They do,” Gala says, wiggling her feet. “Got ‘em off a dwarf cobbler. Paid with four copper and a song. Terrible trade for him.”

They share a laugh, and then a quiet settles between them. Golar takes another slow pull of ale, then glances at her with a tilt of his head.

“You ever seen the stone city below?”

She shakes her head. “Only heard stories. Never been invited.”

He lifts his mug in mock formality. “Consider this your first.”

Gala flushes a little and hesitates, eyes darting to the door.

“Come on,” Golar says. “It ain’t courtship. Just more ale and walls that don’t shake when someone upstairs drops a mug.”

Gala laughs, nervously at first, then nods. “Alright. But if your place smells like pickled onions, I’m running.”

“No promises,” he grins.

Outside, the night is cool and quiet. Knuckle the mule is still munching from the trough, flicking his ears lazily. Golar loads the toolbox into the cart again, helps Gala up with a strong hand, then climbs in himself.

“Homeward,” he says, clicking his tongue. The cart rolls through the starlit streets of Felhedrin, past quiet storefronts and shuttered homes. The city above dozes under its moonlight veil.

At the stables near the edge of the central square, Golar ties Knuckle’s reins, rubs the mule’s snout, and tosses him a crust of bread. “You earned it, you stubborn lout.”

Gala giggles as they turn toward the entrance of the hidden stair, disguised behind an old stone fountain. With a push and a creak, a slab of wall shifts, revealing the spiraling descent into the underground.

The deeper they go, the more the scent of smoke, warm stone, and earth fills the air. Torches flicker in bronze sconces along the carved tunnel walls. Other dwarves pass them now and then, some nodding in greeting, others murmuring about late shifts and spilled ale.

“It’s like a whole world under the world,” Gala whispers, wide-eyed. “I thought it would be damp and cold. But it’s... alive.”

“Alive and older than most of the cities above,” Golar says. “This stone’s been shaped for four thousand years. These stairs were walked by my great-grandfather. His soot’s still in the cracks.”

Down level after level they go, past homes with carved lintels, water channels running through the floor, and clusters of dwarves drinking outside doorways. Finally, they reach Golar’s home, its runed archway welcoming in the torchlight.

Inside, the warmth greets them like an old friend. The hearth glows, candles burn in thick holders, and the furniture’s carved from heavy wood and shaped for comfort. Golar gestures to the living room.

“Sit anywhere that doesn’t squeak.”

Gala drops onto a wide-cushioned chair, her feet not quite reaching the floor.

“I feel like a child in here.”

“You are,” Golar says, handing her a fresh mug. “Compared to these walls.”

They drink slowly, the air thick with smoke and quiet. Gala looks around with wonder.

“It’s beautiful. It’s not cold like I imagined. The light’s so... soft.”

Golar nods. “Takes work to make stone feel like home. But once it’s yours, it never shifts. Surface folk build up. We build in.”

“You ever wish you lived above?”

“Sometimes,” Golar says. “Then I see a ladder and remember why I don’t.”

She laughs, takes another sip, and leans back.

“I like it down here. It feels like stories are written in the walls.”

“They are,” Golar says, puffing his pipe. “You just have to know the right kind of silence to hear ‘em.”

The hours pass in warm conversation, with flickers of candlelight casting soft shadows across stone walls and worn wood. Golar and Gala sit opposite one another, mugs in hand, smoke drifting between them as the topic shifts from surface gossip to favorite tavern foods to childhood memories and ridiculous jobs. Laughter flows as easily as the ale, and though the room is old, it feels newly alive.

Eventually, Gala rises with a small yawn and brushes crumbs from her vest. “I should go,” she says softly, glancing toward the door. “My place isn’t far. Little wooden house by the south gate.”

Golar gets up with her, walking her to the archway. “These tunnels can twist even a sober dwarf’s sense of direction. I’ll take you up to the main stair.”

She shakes her head, smiling. “No need. I remember the way now. The third torch with the cracked sconce, then left past the fountain with the horned fish, then up the spiral. I’ll be alright.”

He eyes her carefully, then gives a slow nod. “If you forget, just knock on any door and say Golar sent you. Or listen for the sound of hammerin’. That’s probably me.”

She grins and steps out into the stone hallway, torchlight catching in her curls. “Thanks for the ale and the talk. It’s rare to feel welcome in a city built out of stone.”

“You’re welcome any time,” Golar says, leaning in the doorway. “Bring a proper appetite next time. I make stew that’ll crack your bones and knit ‘em better.”

Gala laughs as she walks off. “Soon, Golar. Real soon.”

Golar watches until she’s gone from view, then turns back inside. The warmth of the room lingers, but the silence has returned to its rightful place.

He makes his way to the library, settling at his desk where the ancient tomes wait with creased spines and thin parchment. He lights a fresh candle, dips his quill, and opens a thick volume bound in grey hide. Tonight, he studies structural tension techniques used in arched vaults, tracing diagrams that resemble skeletal ribs in stone. A page describes the use of rammed-earth platforms, a method once common in ancient northern dynasties, where layers of earth were pounded in place to form rock-hard foundations. Another discusses **dry**-stone corbelling, a technique in which stones are carefully laid with minimal mortar, each projecting slightly past the last to form a self-supporting arch.

He scratches notes in the margin:

“Stone ring to distribute load—better tension stability.”

“Mortar blend: clay-sand, slow-dry. Avoid lime when in damp wall.”

“Vaulting: remember spring point must bear equal weight either side.”

After a while, he sets down the quill and rolls his shoulders, then heads to the tool rack. From a leather roll, he withdraws his chisels and blades, laying them in a neat line on the sharpening stone. With rhythmic strokes, he slides each one against the oiled surface, sparks flickering as steel sings over grit.

Once the edges gleam, he selects a grey chunk of mountain stone and carries it to his workbench. A square cavity on his main wall has waited empty for weeks, and he finally knows what to place there.

The statue takes shape slowly beneath his hammer and chisel—a squat, seated figure with the broad chest of a dwarf, the legs crossed, and the head of a goat. Its eyes are narrow slits beneath curled horns, and a thin crescent moon is carved deep into its chest. The surface is smoothed with fine sand and cloth, the detailing on the horns intricate and sharp.

Golar speaks quietly as he works, more to the stone than to himself.

“Old gods see all. Stone remembers. This little one’ll watch my fire while I sleep, eh?”

He places it on the bench, examining the way light plays across the half-moon. Satisfied, he nods and steps away, wiping the dust from his hands.

His final task for the night is quiet but purposeful. In the far corner of the workroom, beside the shelves of wax and molds, he sets about making candles. He melts tallow in a cast-iron pot over a small flame, stirring gently with a rod carved from antler. Into the hot liquid, he dips lengths of braided flax wick, letting each coat solidify before dipping again and again, layering until thick, even tapers form.



When cooled and trimmed, he sets the candles in carved stone holders and lines them on a shelf.

“There,” he mutters, wiping his hands on a cloth. “Light for tomorrow. And maybe for Gala.”

The room grows still again, save for the faint sound of the ventilation shafts whispering the breath of the mountain through the walls.

Morning light trickles in through the carved vents of Golar’s dwelling, filtering through thin slats of stone and warming the dust in golden rays. He wakes with a stretch and a crack of his knuckles, grumbling softly beneath his breath as he swings thick legs off the bed. The stone floor is cold, but he welcomes it, grounding himself before another day’s labor.

After a brief wash from the cistern basin, he straps on his apron, gathers his coin pouch, and makes the familiar climb upward through the winding tunnels of the dwarven city. The world above is already stirring when he reaches the surface—the clatter of market carts, the smell of fresh bread and smoke, and the rising chorus of crows on the roof slates.

Knuckle, his ever-alooof mule, stamps his hooves and snorts as Golar approaches.

“Aye, I know, I’m late. You gonna bite or haul today?” Golar mutters, tightening the cart straps.

They roll through the streets of Felhedrin’s artisan quarter, past the tiled rooftops and narrow cobbled alleys that echo with the sounds of clanging hammers and shouted greetings. Elves in pale robes carry scrolls past stout dwarves lugging buckets of mortar. Halfling children dart between carts, chased by the scents of sweet pastries from an open bakery window. A bard plays a mournful tune on a flute near a fountain, barely heard over the clamor of hooves and market haggling.

Golar pulls the cart into the stonemasons’ guild courtyard, where a stone arch frames the ironclad doors. Inside, a bored clerk sits behind a granite counter, her braids tucked beneath a dusty leather cap. Golar tosses fifteen gold coins onto the slate ledger board with a metallic clink.

“Task fee. Let’s get it over with.”

The clerk raises one brow, flips through a stack of sealed envelopes, and hands one to him with a wax mark of the guild—a chisel and tower entwined.

“New job. Big one this time. You’re not working alone.”

Megaron

He grunts, pockets the envelope, and turns back to the cart. At home, he eats leftover stew straight from the pot, lights his pipe, and leans back in the wide chair of his living room, watching the smoke curl in the candlelight. Finally, he cracks the seal and unfolds the letter.

Guild Assignment – North Quarter

Project: Reconstruction of a Megaron-Style Long Hall

"Esteemed Mason, you are tasked with the reconstruction of an ancient-style ceremonial hall inspired by the early Raegean Megaron form. It will be built for the Royal College of Lore as a ceremonial gathering place. Central hearth, axial entryway, columned portico required. Materials to be provided on-site. Work to begin immediately under supervision of Guild Foreman Thrain Emberline."

Golar huffs through his beard. "Megaron? Fancy hall for robe-wearin' bookfolk. Still, good stone's good stone."

He gathers his tools into the chest, locking them in place with straps and slings. With Knuckle loaded and yawning, they rattle off again through the city, this time turning north where the streets grow wider and the buildings larger—homes of wealthy merchants, grand staircases, elven balconies woven with ivy. The sounds shift to measured hammering, distant bell chimes, and the murmur of scholars moving in clusters, parchment in hand.

Vendors call out from stalls—glassblowers, parchment dyers, a man hawking eel pies. A human bard juggles three burning knives near the city square while a pair of guards mutter over a gambling board in a shadowed alley.

Golar pulls the cart to the edge of a broad plaza where a skeletal wooden frame stands amidst stacked stone blocks and timber columns. Several other workers are already there—one dwarf sharpening a trowel, two humans unloading tools, and a wiry gnome sketching on a plank of wood.

"Ah, there's the hammer himself," calls a familiar voice. Thrain Emberline, stocky and bald, approaches with arms folded.

"Thrain," Golar grunts. "You the one saddled me with a Megaron?"

"Blame the College. They want 'authentic ancient design'—hearth in the center, open plan, symmetry. It'll be good work, just slow with all their damn specifications."

Golar steps down and inspects the materials: freshly quarried limestone, timber pillars notched and numbered, jars of dry mortar powder, baskets of sand, and bronze brackets for the ceiling beams.

"Looks like all's here," he mutters, running a hand along a limestone slab. "Stone's clean. Good grain. Haven't seen cuts like this since my da's time."

One of the human masons steps up, offering a hand. "Name's Harven. You the master mason then?"

"I'm Golar. I do the carving, not the title-grabbing."

The gnome pipes up from behind a plank. "I'm Mireek. Architect liaison. If you need design diagrams or spatial recalculations, come to me."

Golar squints. "You speak Dwarvish?"

“Six dialects,” Mireek replies without missing a beat.

Thrain claps Golar on the shoulder. “Good crew this time. We’ll raise this Megaron so fine the College’ll write sonnets about it.”

Golar rolls his shoulders and pulls out his measuring rope. “Let’s see if they remember to leave room for the hearth. Wouldn’t want their ancient hall going cold.”

“Just don’t decorate it with goat-men,” Thrain chuckles.

“I decorate my walls, not theirs.”

The crew laughs lightly as Golar sets to work surveying the foundation lines, tapping the stone with the heel of his hammer, already hearing the shape of the Megaron rising in his mind like a song from buried stone.

The morning sun rises high over the north quarter, casting long shadows behind scaffold frames and the half-laid foundation of the Megaron-style long hall. Golar stands at the edge of the worksite, sleeves rolled, apron dusted with grit, a chisel already in one hand and his favorite hammer in the other. Around him, the day hums to life—thunks of timber being stacked, the rasp of saws, clinks of metal as tools are sorted. The scent of fresh limestone and wood oil fills the air.

“Harven, get me the thick edge slab, the one with the notch on the north side,” Golar calls, kneeling to mark the line where the hearth’s outer wall will be set.

“Right away,” Harven says, hauling the block with a groan. “This one?”

“That’s the one. Drop it—careful—yeah, right there.”

Golar levels the stone, checks the line with a cord, and begins shaping one edge for the join. Chips of stone fly as he chisels, steady and sure, humming a slow dwarven tune under his breath. Mireek, the gnome architect, hops over with a scroll in hand.

“Golar, do you have a moment?”

“If it ain’t a design change, speak,” Golar mutters without stopping.

Mireek grins. “It’s a clarification. The College insists the portico columns must mirror the early Raegean dimensions exactly—eight feet tall, fluted, with squared bases.”

Golar looks up. “Eight feet? For a hall that’ll be six inside? You want them bumpin’ their heads on ceiling beams?”

“The dimensions are symbolic, apparently.”

“Symbolic of what? Sore foreheads?”

Mireek snorts and shrugs. “Scholars. They live in books, not buildings.”

Golar waves him off with a grunt and returns to his task. By midmorning, the hearth's stone outline is set and leveled. Thrain inspects it, nodding.

"You laid that fast."

"I lay faster when I don't have to argue with elf-glass walls and spiral tower stairs," Golar says, wiping sweat from his brow.

They break midday for a quick meal—bread, cheese, a skewer of roasted onion and salted lamb. The workers sit beneath a temporary canvas awning. Golar eats in silence at first, then asks, "Any of you worked a hearth-centered plan before?"

Harven nods. "Back in the southern provinces. Used basalt, though. Harder than a tax collector's heart."

Mireek chimes in. "These Megaron designs are all about central balance. Hearth, roof hole above, symmetry side to side. Symbol of unity, they say."

Golar chews thoughtfully. "Unity's in the stone joints. Not in symmetry."

When the meal's done, Golar sets back to work carving the column bases. He runs his hands over the rough limestone, choosing the cleanest slabs, scoring them with a metal pick, and then hammering edges into perfect square foundations.

"Dresa, hold that upright while I set this," he says as the scarred female worker braces a timber column.

"You're not bad company for someone who growls more than he speaks," she says with a smirk.

Golar chuckles. "Keep flatterin' me and I'll carve your name into the cornerstone."

"Just spell it right."

As the sun leans west, the structure begins to take form. Two fluted columns are raised and pegged, their bases locked into the stone footings Golar set by hand. Wooden lintels are measured and lifted with pulleys, and Golar checks every notch and joint, correcting even the smallest misalignments with a gloved smack of his mallet.

By late afternoon, the central hearth ring is in place, the floor smoothed and dusted. Golar squats down beside it, running a calloused hand across the rim.

"She'll burn clean," he says, mostly to himself. "Draw air right, vent up straight through the beam cutout."

Thrain walks over, arms crossed. "It's good work, Golar."

Golar stands, stretching his back. "It's not finished yet."

"No, but you gave it bones today."

The sun sets with a golden wash over the plaza. Tools are packed, stone scraps swept into bins, and workers begin filtering away. Golar lingers, staring at the rising shape of the hall.

Mireek passes by with a tired smile. “We’ll start the roof beams tomorrow. I’ll bring the new scrolls in the morning.”

“I’ll be here before them,” Golar says.

“Of that,” Mireek says, “I have no doubt.”

Golar loads his cart in silence, the mule already dozing as he ties the straps. The city glows in the fading light as he turns the cart homeward, the new Megaron behind him standing a little taller, a little firmer than it had at dawn.

By the time Golar returns home, the last glimmers of daylight are retreating behind the stone beams of the surface city. He walks Knuckle to the stable, gives him a pat and a feed bag of oats, then trudges down the winding passages into the belly of the mountain. His body aches, his hands are rough with fresh blisters, and dust clings to the lines of his face like soot in a forge.

Inside his dwelling, the warmth welcomes him like a loyal hound. He tosses his tools near the workbench with a sigh, unbuckles his apron, and drops onto the wide bench near the hearth. From the shelf, he pulls out a tin tankard and fills it to the brim from his dark ale barrel. One mug disappears in a single gulp. Then another. And another. By the fourth, his shoulders have loosened, and his eyes sink half-lidded behind the haze of pipe smoke.

He eats a thick slice of bread smeared with pork fat and a cold boiled egg, then lights a candle and sits in the library. A tome on weight distribution in vaulted ceilings holds his attention. Diagrams of load-bearing timbers, wall buttressing, and corbel vaults fill the pages. He traces his finger across a drawing of a triangular truss joint, murmuring to himself.

“Won’t hold without the bracing pins. Too narrow an angle, it’ll buckle.”

After a while, the candle burns low, and the silence of the stone home deepens. He leaves the book open on the desk, crawls into bed with the familiar groan of stone under his back, and drifts to sleep to the soft exhale of air through the vent shafts.

Before dawn, he’s awake again. He eats a quick meal of dried meat and oats, straps on his boots, gathers his tools, and climbs back to the surface city, where the streets still sleep under grey morning mist.

The cart rumbles through the waking alleys as Knuckle ambles ahead with slow patience. Golar arrives at the Megaron site to find only Thrain and Mireek already there, standing beside a pile of freshly delivered timber beams.

“Morning,” Thrain says, rubbing his hands. “Got a long day ahead. Beams need placing, lintels fixed, and roof supports notched.”

“Let’s start with the lintels,” Golar says, hopping down and rolling up his sleeves. “No point lifting roof timber onto a shaky frame.”

By midmorning, more workers arrive, and the worksite becomes a symphony of effort—mallets hammering pegs, saws rasping through wood, scaffolds creaking under shifting weight. Golar directs two men to lift the front stone lintel into position.

“Mind the edge! Don’t scrape that face or I’ll have your coin back in chisels!”

“Easy, easy—there!” Harven grunts as the lintel slots into place. Golar climbs the side and taps it with a hammer.

“Flush and clean. Mark it, we’ll seal it with mortar by midday.”

Near the hearth ring, Mireek is checking the alignment with a string line.

“Golar, what’s your take on the support angle for the ceiling struts? We’re one degree off-center.”

Golar leans over, squints, and mutters, “Shift the rear beam half a handspan. Don’t argue, just do it.”

He walks over to a set of support brackets, inspecting their iron nails.

“These won’t hold in cold weather. Get me the bronze pins. We’ll drive ‘em in clean with fire-set glue.”

By noon, the skeleton of the Megaron is visible in full shape. The central hearth yawns in the floor like a waiting mouth, its rim lined with chiseled stone. Four columns rise from the base, lintels tied across the top. Golar wipes sweat from his brow with a leather rag and sits for a quick break.

Dresa brings him a mug of watered wine. “You’re building this thing like it’s gonna last two thousand years.”

Golar snorts. “That’s the idea. Stone don’t know the difference between ten winters or ten ages. If you build it right, it never asks questions.”

They eat side by side—flatbread, roasted root vegetables, and a slice of dried fruit cake passed down from Mireek’s sack.

After the break, they begin assembling the roof frame. Golar climbs the scaffold, walking the beam like a squat bear, guiding the others below.

“Push! Now peg it! Brace the corner! If that beam shifts, I’ll come down and shift your teeth instead!”

Harven grins. “You ever tried not shouting?”

Golar yells down, “You ever tried listening the first time?”

By late afternoon, the roof trusses are locked in. Golar taps each with a mallet, checking for echoes, then seals joints with fire glue and soft pitch. When the last beam is secured, he steps back and surveys the structure—square, balanced, strong.

Thrain claps him on the back. “That’s a fine frame. You should build temples.”

“I build anything that don’t leak,” Golar mutters.

Mireek raises a toast with a flask of plum spirit. “To the bones of the Megaron. Tomorrow, we skin it in slate and fill it with fire.”

Golar nods, already thinking of his chisels, his tools, and the long haul of carving the doorway reliefs.

“Let the College bring their chants,” he says. “We’ll make a hall that sings without ‘em.”

The sun sinks low again as Golar packs up, his boots covered in sawdust, his arms coated in lime. Knuckle waits by the cart, snorting at flies. Another day carved into the bones of stone.

The hearth glows with a steady orange as Golar returns home, the stone dwelling quiet save for the crackle of flame and the soft shuffle of his heavy boots. He hangs his apron by the door, rolls his stiff shoulders, and sets about cooking—thick barley gruel with smoked mushrooms and slivers of salted pork. The iron pot simmers low as he settles into the quiet routine of the evening.

He eats at his table with slow satisfaction, then pours three generous mugs of ale, each vanishing faster than the last. Smoke from his pipe coils lazily toward the carved ceiling beams. He sits a while in the flickering light, letting the stillness of his home ease the ache in his arms and legs. When the last ember fades, he climbs into bed and sleeps, stone walls cradling his breath like they have for generations.

Three weeks pass.

The Megaron rises steadily in that time—walls sealed, beams pegged, roof layered with slate. Workers come and go, but Golar remains, his tools worn thinner, his beard longer, his presence as constant as the stone itself. Each day chips away at the vision, and each evening restores him enough to chip again.

Then comes the final day.

Golar wakes before the light filters through the vents. He eats a dense loaf of nut bread and a wedge of goat cheese, washes his face in cold water, and shoulders his tool chest. As always, Knuckle greets him with a disgruntled snort. Golar pats the mule’s nose.

“This is the last haul, old beast. After this, you can bite at flies while I drink in peace.”

The cart rolls through the morning hush of Felhedrin. Dew clings to roof tiles, and early vendors sweep their stoops in silence. When Golar reaches the north quarter, the Megaron greets him like a memory made real—its fluted columns gleaming in the new sun, the slate roof tight and dark, the central hearth still bare but waiting.

Thrain and Mireek stand near the portico, arms crossed, watching the last scaffolding being dismantled.

“You’re early,” Thrain says, voice hoarse.

“You’re breathing,” Golar replies. “Let’s get to it.”

The day’s work begins with the final touches—mortar smoothing, the last ceiling tiles set, the bronze doorplates installed on the tall wooden entry. Golar inspects the interior, his eyes scanning every corner: the polished flagstone floor, the skylight vent above the hearth, the carved wooden lintels depicting dwarven motifs and flame runes.

He calls over to Dresä. “Bring the carving chisels. We’ve got one more stone to speak.”

She brings the kit, and Golar kneels at the inner wall by the hearth’s right. With slow, precise movements, he begins carving the guild crest—a chisel over an arch—into the stone surface, then his own mark beside it: a stylized goat’s head over a half moon.

Mireek watches, arms folded. “Think they’ll understand the goat?”

“They don’t need to. It ain’t for them.”

As the sun leans into late afternoon, the last stone is polished, the final floor swept. Workers step back, tools down, and the hall breathes in its own silence for the first time.

“It’s done,” Harven says, wiping his hands on a rag. “Feels good.”

Thrain approaches Golar with a small leather pouch. He drops it into Golar’s hand with a solid weight. “Two hundred gold. Guild pay for master-grade work. You earned it.”

Golar doesn’t open it. He just nods once, then tucks it into his belt. “Might buy a second chair for my place.”

Mireek grins. “Or a whole tavern.”

“Too noisy. I’ll stick to one chair.”

The crew disperses slowly, laughter and light words exchanged like a soft aftershock of the build. Golar lingers, alone for a moment, running his hand along one of the interior columns.

“She’ll stand long after any of us,” he says quietly.

Then he turns, shoulders his chest, and walks back to the cart. Knuckle greets him with a swish of the tail. Golar climbs aboard and clicks his tongue.

“Home. The job’s done.”

As the mule plods through the stone streets of Felhedrin, the Megaron stands tall behind them, lit by the falling sun—its bones shaped by hands, its silence shaped by stone.

By the time Golar gets home from the Megaron site, dusk is falling like a heavy cloak. He drops his tool chest just inside the door, shrugs off his apron, and stomps toward the kitchen with a hunger for peace and drink. He pours himself a deep mug of ale and downs it in one long, burning gulp. Then another. And another. By the fourth, his shoulders finally sink, and he exhales a long, satisfied breath through his nose.

“Not bad for a day's reward,” he mutters, eyeing the gold pouch on the table.

With a smirk, he heads out again, locking the heavy door behind him. His cart clatters through the stone streets, lantern light bouncing off polished arches and mossy gutters as he makes his way to the brewery near the trade quarter. The old dwarf who runs it, Braim, greets him with a knowing nod.

“Stockin’ up, are ya?” Braim grins, already tapping lids with his mallet.

“Six barrels. Darker the better,” Golar says.

“Six?” Braim raises a brow. “You hosting a clan moot or digging your own grave?”

Golar pays without comment, helps roll each barrel into the cart, and returns home by the deep-lit lamps of the undercity. The air smells of stone, wax, and damp metal. One by one, he rolls the barrels from the cart, across the threshold, and into his kitchen. He stacks them two-high beside the hearth and wedges a few in the cool cavity he’d chiseled into the wall months ago just for this purpose.

“Good stone and good ale, all under one roof,” he mutters with a grunt, dusting his hands.

After the ale’s secured, he lights a few more candles, stokes the hearth, and settles into his chair with a large, cracked leather tome—“Chronicles of Felhedrin’s High Kings and Forgotten Wards”. The book, bound in old red hide with tarnished silver clasps, creaks as it opens.

He reads about the first ruler, King Ardhel Thorneye, a half-elven war-chief who founded Felhedrin after breaking the Siege of the Western Hills. Thorneye, known for wearing a crown forged from melted enemy blades, ruled for nearly eighty winters before he was slain by treachery from within his court—his own brother, it was said, poisoned him with ink-dipped bread. The throne passed to the dwarf-queen Vilda Ironstem, who fortified the city’s foundations and began the tradition of stone sigils carved into every home.

“Always blood, always stone,” Golar mutters. “Nothing changes but the names.”

The following days are quieter. He does not rise early, nor does he visit the guild. He smokes, reads, drinks, and eats simple meals. The gold pouch remains tied, untouched for now. Golar only works when the coin thins, and he has no pressing need. The stone can wait.

Then one afternoon, the familiar knock taps on the heavy door.

He opens it to find Gala standing there, cheeks pink from the climb and arms full of wrapped parcels.

“Brought food,” she says brightly. “And my elbows ache from kneading dough.”

“Come in, then,” Golar says, stepping aside. “Ale’s fresh, stew’s old, but not bad.”

She enters, eyes already sweeping the place with a smile. “You really did stock up,” she says, eyeing the barrels.

“Some folk plan winters with wood. I plan with brew.”

Gala laughs and begins unwrapping bundles—roasted carrots in honey, bread rolls crusted in salt, a mushroom pie, and a tin of peppered apple slices.

“You cook all this?” Golar asks, genuinely surprised.

“Every day,” she says, setting plates. “Got hired at the bakery by old Merra. She’s got a hell-oven that could bake stones. I’ve got flour in my hair and burn marks on my wrists, but the smell of pies in the morning makes it worth it.”

They sit and eat, trading jokes and quiet stories. Golar listens more than he speaks, occasionally refilling their mugs.

After the meal, Gala rises and walks across the kitchen barefoot. “Your floors are cold, you know. You should put some animal skins down—soft ones. Walking on stone’s like stepping on bones.”

“Hm. Never thought of it,” Golar says, stroking his beard. “Might be worth a walk to the market.”

They head out together. The undercity’s stone paths are busy with twilight commerce—torches flicker, vendors hawk everything from cured meats to alchemical oils. At a tanner’s stall, Golar buys one thick deer hide and three wide boar skins.

“You sure you want boar?” the seller asks.

“They’re ugly, but warm,” Golar grunts.

They carry the hides back, unroll them in the living room and kitchen. The place softens immediately, the skins muting the sharpness of the stone underfoot.

“Told you,” Gala says with a proud nod.

Later, as Golar lights candles in the library, Gala lingers by the shelves, running a finger over the spines.

“You’ve got some strange titles here,” she says, pulling out a few.

Golar nods. “Old books. Collected or passed down.”

She reads aloud a few of the covers:

“The Breath Beneath Stone: Theory of Living Architecture”

“Tales of the Deep Fathers and Hollow Thrones”

“Treatise on Vaulted Strength: The Stone Holds Memory”

“Chronicles of the Fallen Forge-Saints”

“On Silent Steps: The History of the Underpaths”

“Some of these sound older than the city,” Gala says, flipping through a page of thick, ink-heavy script.

“They are,” Golar replies. “Some came from ruins older than any king’s bones. I read what I can. The rest... I just keep company with.”

She glances at him, then smiles. “I like your home. Even the cold parts.”

He nods once. “It’s better with company.”

The day spent with Gala lingers in Golar’s mind like the warmth of embers left smoldering in the hearth. After she leaves, smiling and waving with a promise to return next week with berry pies, Golar takes a long smoke by the candlelight and finally turns in for the night.

The Mines

The next morning, he wakes with the chill breath of deep stone on his cheeks. After a quick breakfast of root mash and salted goat meat, he straps on his boots and takes a lantern, a length of chalk rope, his broad-tipped hammer, and a chunk of thick charcoal wrapped in oiled cloth. He doesn’t need the cart or mule today. Today, he’s going deep.

Descending beyond the familiar stone streets of the dwarven city, Golar passes through the heavy-forged doors that mark the entrance to the mines. Two guards nod as he enters, dwarves in soot-blackened mail leaning on poleaxes. The air grows heavier as he moves through the winding shafts lit only by red crystals and hanging lanterns. The scent of sweat, earth, and ancient dust thickens. The walls are black with soot, scarred by years of picks and blasting powder.

He finds Gard and Umer at a break station, sitting on upturned crates with tin mugs in hand, faces marked by years of soot and stone dust. Gard’s beard is singed on one side; Umer’s left boot is tied on with twine.

“Well, if it ain’t the stone-polisher from the up-halls,” Gard says with a grin.

“You down here lookin’ to steal our jobs, Golar?” Umer asks.

“I’m here to keep the ceiling from landin’ on your thick heads,” Golar replies. “Heard you’ve been losing ground.”

Gard nods grimly. “Aye. Section nine collapsed last week. No one dead, thank the Forge, but close. We need you to mark out where the pillar blocks should go. Some of the old tunnels are sagging like stretched leather.”

Umer hands Golar a folded sketch of the tunnel layout. “Start at shaft C-14 and move eastward. Five spans between each set, but we trust your eyes.”

Golar takes it, pockets the map, and lights his lantern.

“Alright then. Let’s see what the bones of the mountain have to say.”

He walks deep into the tunnel system, his boots scuffing over stone dust. The farther he goes, the narrower and darker it becomes. Some areas are warped from ancient pressure, the walls cracked in long vertical veins. He taps along the walls with the butt of his hammer, listening for the hollow thud of weakness. At a section where the ceiling has bowed downward with fine lines of stress forming above, he stops.

He takes out the charcoal and marks a thick black X on the floor and another on the wall.

“First post here,” he mutters. “Load distribution’s off. She’s saggin’ on the north face.”

He continues, finding another weak point near an old ventilation shaft. Another X.

Then a split where a tunnel branches and leans unnaturally, the support beams buckled.

“This one’s close to fallin’. Pillar here, before the roof decides to breathe.”

By mid-afternoon, he’s marked ten spots with heavy black Xs and notched them on the parchment. He returns to the shaft entrance, handing the map to the mine overseer, a wiry dwarf named Brod Flintlock, whose face seems permanently creased by worry.

“You marked the worst of it?” Brod asks.

“Marked ‘em all,” Golar says. “Pillars need to be full span. Cut ‘em wide, load-bearing tops. You skimp on width, they’ll crack under next quake.”

Brod nods and hands over a pouch of coins. “Thirty gold. It’s fair. Couldn’t trust any of the greenhands with that job.”

“I don’t come down here for the air,” Golar replies.

Later, Golar sits with Gard and Umer near the edge of the central shaft, the lanterns glowing red in the gloom.

“You still swingin’ hammer every day, Umer?” Golar asks, chewing on a strip of dried meat.

“Every cursed day,” Umer replies. “I see rocks in my sleep. Dream of pickaxes dancing.”

Gard laughs. “He’s been stuck on tunnel six for a month. Keeps hitting quartz veins and thinks he’s close to silver.”

“One day I’ll strike it and leave you all behind in gold dust.”

Golar leans back. “And then you’ll spend it all on bad ale and worse boots.”

They share a round of laughter, muffled by the weight of the deep stone.



“Still,” Gard says, staring into the shadows. “Work like this... it takes pieces outta you. Little bits at a time.”

“Stone’s honest,” Golar says. “It breaks if you push wrong. Holds if you listen. Ain’t many things in life that clear.”

Umer nods. “Aye. But it sure don’t forgive mistakes.”

The conversation trails into silence, broken only by the distant sound of pickaxes, the faint echo of carts, and the steady drip of mineral-laced water from high above.

After a while, Golar rises, dusts off his coat, and tightens the strap on his lantern.

“I’ve done what I came to do. Keep your heads low, and if the ceiling groans, run faster than you think you can.”

Gard grins. “We’ll be here, brother. When the gold’s gone and the stone stays.”

Golar nods once and heads back up through the tunnelways, the dark closing behind him, the dust trailing off his boots like old shadows.

The days pass in quiet routine—reading, drinking, small repairs around the home—until a sudden thunderous knock breaks the calm. Golar looks up from a half-carved bit of sandstone, his pipe dropping from his lips as the pounding echoes through the stone halls.

He stomps to the door, unlatches it, and swings it open.

Gard stands there, panting, face pale under a fresh coat of dust. His eyes are wide.

“There was a collapse!” he blurts. “One of the young lads tried to carve out a support pillar in tunnel eight—he did it wrong. Real wrong. It came down on him. He’s dead, Golar.”

Golar’s eyes narrow. His beard bristles as he growls low, the anger settling into his gut like cold iron.

“Damn maggots,” he mutters. “Can’t follow a mark, can’t read stone... Now there’s blood in the rock.”

Gard nods, swallowing. “We need proper pillars. Real ones. The kind only you can carve.”

Golar straightens, already turning back into the house. “Alright. I’ll be down in half an hour.”

He eats quickly—just a wedge of hard cheese, dried mushrooms, and a crust of bread stuffed into a pouch. Then he opens the old ironbound chest at the foot of his sleeping quarters and begins strapping on his gear: chainmail shirt, padded leather undercoat, iron-braced boots, gloves reinforced with bone studs, and his thick iron helmet engraved with the rune of his family line. His short sword is sheathed at his hip, his shield strapped to the cart. The old mines had dark places—some collapsed, some deeper than memory—and he knew better than to go down unarmed.

He throws his pickaxe, hammer, and chisel roll into a wooden box, then lights a lantern and walks to a tunnel that leads into the mine’s heavy shaft doors. Guards open them at the sight of him without a word.

The mines are darker than before, more tense. The air is tight with grief and fear, the quiet whispers of workers echoing through the narrow tunnels. Golar says nothing as he walks past them, heading toward the first marked site—the place where the doomed worker had miscut the angle and brought the ceiling down.

The rubble has been mostly cleared, but the space gapes now—raw and unsettled. Golar surveys the spot where his original black X still marks the stone floor, then sets his lantern in a niche and unrolls his tools.

He begins with the pickaxe, widening the base where the pillar will root. The sound of metal striking stone reverberates down the shaft. He switches to his hammer and broad chisel, shaping the core with methodical strikes, carving the pillar up from the stone beneath instead of setting something foreign in place.

He mutters as he works, sweat mixing with stone dust in his beard.

“Dig too deep and you take the spine... leave too much and the weight shears it off. There’s a line, and you either know it or you die under it.”

Hours pass. The tunnel echoes with the steady rhythm of his labor. He works without pause, the shape slowly forming—broad base, tapered body, flared cap. He tests it with the flat of his hand, checking for weakness, tapping gently to hear the tone of the stone's voice.



In the middle of the afternoon, the overseer, Brod Flintlock, arrives, ducking under a timber support. His face is as weary as ever, dust crusting in his beard.

“You carve fast,” Brod says, crossing his arms.

“I carve right,” Golar replies, not looking up. “The lad who died tried to shave time. That’s what brought the stone down.”

Brod sighs. “He was young. Thought speed meant skill.”

“Speed means graves if you don’t know what you’re doing,” Golar says, pausing to wipe his brow. “Next time, you wait for the master mason. Or you bring two bodies instead of one.”

Brod nods solemnly. “Understood. You think the design will hold?”

“It will. This one’s coming up straight from the bedrock. No wedges, no guesswork. She’ll carry three times what the last one could.”

“You need anything?”

Golar gestures to a small barrel nearby. “Water and some fresh chisels if you’ve got ‘em. And send word up that I’ll be here for days. There’s more pillars needed.”

“You planning to do them all yourself?”

Golar finally looks up, eyes hard under the iron rim of his helmet.

“Someone has to.”

Brod nods again, then turns, his boots crunching away through the grit.

Golar returns to his work, humming a low dwarven tune beneath his breath, the echoes of his tools ringing deep into the stone. The mine may be broken, but he will mend it—one pillar at a time.

The first pillar stands tall and firm, cut clean from the bedrock, its base braced wide and its cap flared to push evenly against the ceiling above. Golar runs his palm over the finished stone, feeling the way it pushes back against his weight. It sings with silence—a good sign.

“Hold strong,” he mutters, wiping stone dust from his gloves. “That’s one spine fixed.”

He gathers his tools, re-oils the lantern, and makes his way down a sloping tunnel toward the second site. The air grows heavier here, damper. The ceiling is lower, the stone colder. A few wooden planks crisscross the entrance of a side shaft nearby, old and splintered, marked with the faded rune for *closed*. He ignores it—old tunnels were sealed off all the time. Collapses, beasts, forgotten ore veins.

He kneels at the second black X, sets his pickaxe to the floor, and begins chipping out the base. Hours pass in grunting labor. Sweat beads under his helmet. The rhythm of the work consumes him, the hammer and chisel singing in unison as the pillar's rough form begins to rise.

But behind him, in the half-dark, something shifts.

From the crack between planks, two black, glassy eyes blink.

A massive spider—its body the size of a cart wheel, legs like spear shafts—creeps silently into the tunnel. Its fangs glisten with venom, and its movements are unnatural in their quiet precision.

The moment before it strikes, the sound of its limbs skittering across loose stone betrays it.

Golar whirls just in time to see it lunging. He lets out a roar.

“By Miradhir’s cunt—die, you freak!”

He swings his pickaxe two-handed, smashing it against the creature’s side. The blow lands with a wet crunch, shearing off one of its front legs. The spider hisses and reels, greenish blood spraying the floor. It lunges again—fangs driving for Golar’s shoulder.

He ducks, rolls across the dust, grabs his short sword from its sheath, and rises to meet the next charge. The blade arcs, slicing across the spider’s face. It screams—a high, chittering shriek—and one fang cracks, splintering.

But not before the other bites deep into his left thigh.



“GRAAH!” Golar howls, stabbing the sword upward with both hands into its underbelly. The spider jerks, shudders, and collapses in a twitching heap beside the half-finished pillar.

Golar staggers back, gritting his teeth, blood running down into his boot. He falls against the wall and rips a cloth from his pouch, tying it tight above the wound.

“Venom or not, you got me, beast... but I’m still breathin’.”

After several long minutes of steadying breath, he limps back to the pillar and spits on the ground.

“Not done yet.”

He resumes carving, slower now, leaning more on his good leg. By the time the main shaft is formed, his gloves are stiff with blood and dust. The spider’s corpse lies twisted in the corner, legs curled inward like a broken trap.

Later, he hears boots coming. Umer and Gard round the bend, both panting from the climb.

“We heard shouting,” Umer says, eyes widening at the dead spider. “What in the nine hells happened?”

“Beast came from the sealed tunnel,” Golar grunts. “Took a bite of me before I carved its guts out. But the pillar’s done.”

Gard hurries to check the ceiling. “There’s a crack forming above. We need bracing before the weight shifts.”

Golar nods. “Bring the wooden beams. We’ll wedge them while the stone sets.”

Umer and Gard fetch the long timber supports from the shaft’s staging point and drag them into place. Golar marks the anchor points on the floor, then directs them.

“Slide that one under the east brace. Lift it while I hammer the footplate—steady, damn it!”

The beam groans as they wedge it up, Golar driving iron spikes into the base with measured force. Dust showers down from the ceiling, but the crack holds. Another brace is lifted into place and fastened.

Gard wipes his brow. “That should do it. Holds tight.”

“Aye,” Golar grunts, testing the resistance. “We’ll come back with mortar reinforcement tomorrow. For now, it’ll sleep safe.”

Umer eyes the dead spider. “We need to seal that tunnel properly. That thing had cousins, I’ll bet.”

Golar narrows his eyes. “Aye. Next time I’m bringin’ fire.”

The three of them sit for a moment, backs against the stable wall, drinking from a shared flask of bitter root wine. The blood has dried on Golar’s leg, but he makes no complaint.

Gard glances at him. “You alright?”

“I’ve bled worse,” Golar mutters. “Stone don’t care if you’re hurt. It still needs shaping.”

The tunnel is quiet now, save for their breath and the slow creak of settling beams.

Over the next few weeks, Golar toils in the deep. Each day sees another pillar hewn from raw stone, each one set with methodical fury. The tunnels begin to breathe easier, their groans and creaks less frequent. But the deeper he goes, the more the air changes—thicker, damper, laced with something foul that no pickaxe can dig out.

Today, the last pillar is nearly done. Only one remains, and it lies near another sealed-off passage, barely marked by a crude wooden frame and half-rotted planks. As Golar approaches, he feels it in his bones—the way the tunnel watches back. He sets down his tools and raises his lantern.

Then he sees them.

Eyes. Dozens of them. Flickering reflections in the dark, just beyond the rotted wood. Too many for spiders.

Golar snarls, drawing his short sword and spitting to the side.

“Come out, you pieces of rotten shits!”

With a flurry of screeches, eight goblins burst from the black. Their blades are rusted, their teeth crooked, their skin yellow-green and wet with cave filth. They shriek and charge, weapons flailing.



The first reaches Golar with a crude axe raised. Golar meets him with a roar, sidestepping and swinging low—his sword hacks the goblin’s legs out from under him. The goblin crumples, screaming, and Golar finishes him with a stomp.

Another leaps from the side, blade flashing. Golar catches the strike on his gauntlet, grunts as it slices through the leather, then counters with a headbutt. The goblin’s skull cracks, its body going limp before it even hits the ground.

A third charges—Golar swings wide and cleaves its head clean from the shoulders, blood spraying in an arc that paints the wall. He turns, only to be tackled from behind. A jagged dagger cuts his cheek, and one goblin grabs his beard and yanks hard.

“RAAGH—YOU STUNTED MUCUS-BRAINED SHIT!”

Golar smashes the back of his head into the goblin’s nose. Bone cracks. Another leaps onto his side and slashes at his leg, drawing blood, but Golar guts him with a backhanded strike.

One goblin tries to run past, but Golar kicks him in the gut, slamming him against the tunnel wall. The next he catches by the wrist mid-swing and hacks off its arm with a roar, then buries his sword into its chest, twisting hard.

A club smashes into the side of his face—his nose bursts in a spray of blood. He stumbles, blinded, and falls flat on his face. The goblins screech with delight, lunging in for the kill.

But Golar rolls, grabs a fist-sized rock, and smashes it into the nearest goblin's jaw, shattering it. Another jumps onto him, and Golar drives his sword up under its ribs, snarling with pain and fury.

The last goblin, wide-eyed and shrieking, turns to flee—but Golar is on him in two limping strides. He grabs it by the neck and drives his blade straight through its chest, pinning it to the mine wall.

Then there is silence. Only his panting breath and the steady drip of blood.

He stands, bloodied, nose crooked, face swollen, and wipes gore from his blade.

“Should’ve stayed in the dark, you crawling bastards.”

Later, bruised and smeared in dirt and blood, Golar limps into the mining quarters. The workers go quiet at the sight of him—goblin blood crusted on his boots, beard torn in patches, a deep scowl across his face.

Brod Flintlock approaches, jaw hanging.

“You alright? You look like a troll used you for firewood.”

“Goblin nest,” Golar grunts, tossing a bloody tooth onto the table. “Eight of ‘em. They’re not watching anymore.”

Brod swallows, then counts out a heavy purse.

“Sixty gold. And a personal thank-you from everyone in these tunnels. You’ve earned it, Golar.”

Golar takes the pouch and walks over to the keg. He grabs a mug, fills it, and drains it in one long pull. Then he lets out a monstrous croak—deep, echoing, a sound that rolls through the stone like a warhorn.

The stench of blood, sweat, and stale goblin entrails wafts from him like smoke from a forge. Miners wrinkle their noses, one coughing.

“By the Forge, Golar,” Umer says, laughing. “You smell like a dead troll’s sock.”

“Better than smelling like fear,” Golar grins, then spits blood into the brazier. “You see anything come outta a sealed tunnel, you send word. I’ll carve it a tomb right on the spot.”

Gard claps him on the shoulder. “You’re a lunatic.”

“I’m a stonemason,” Golar replies. “But the stone ain’t the only thing that needs carving these days.”

With that, he leaves the mine behind, limping slightly but standing tall. He rides the cart back home under torchlight, the city’s deep paths familiar again. When he reaches his door, he doesn’t light a candle. Just sets down the gold, leans against the wall, and lets the silence fold over him like the stone that had never failed him yet.

He shrugs off his bloodstained coat and limps toward the large wooden chest at the foot of his sleeping quarters. The hinges groan as he opens it, the scent of oiled leather and iron rising like an old memory.

Piece by piece, he places his armor inside—helmet first, then gloves, boots, chainmail, belt, and shield. Each item set carefully, not as a warrior removing his arms, but like a craftsman putting away his tools. He then reaches beneath the armor to lift out a smaller wooden box, the surface worn smooth and carved with simple dwarven patterns—interlocking squares and knot-lines.

He sets the box on his worktable and opens it.

Inside gleams the sum of his effort: a pile of gold coins—twenty from the watchtower, two hundred from the Megaron, thirty and sixty from the mine. He drops the new coins in, letting them clink against the others. The total now rests at 280 gold. Not a fortune, but it has weight, and more importantly, it’s earned.

He reaches in and gently lifts a small locket. The worn brass hinges creak as he opens it, revealing two small hand-drawn portraits inside—his mother, with her tight bun and stern eyes, and his father, whose beard curled in a perfect fork, face lined but kind.

He runs his thumb across their faces.

“Still swingin’ the hammer, Ma. Still haven’t split my own thumb, Da.”

Next, he pulls out a silver ring with a worn inscription: “*Stone bends to patient hands.*” His grandfather’s words, etched into metal.

He remembers the old dwarf’s voice, gravelly and slow: “A rush’d wall is a widow’s roof. Let the stone tell you how it wants to sit, lad.”

Then his father’s, deeper but firm: “Don’t hammer like you’re crushin’. Hammer like you’re callin’ the shape to rise. The chisel’s not a blade, it’s a guide.”

He sets the ring back and lifts a silver necklace with a small hammer charm, a gift from his mother before she passed. Last, he picks up a rough blue-green stone—unpolished, but with a shimmer of value. He’d found it years ago on the mine floor and never traded it, never even told anyone. It reminded him of something old and unspoken, like the heart of the mountain itself.

He places the items back with care, closes the box, and lets out a long breath. Then, stiff-legged, he walks into the kitchen and starts dinner.

He seasons a skillet of chicken with salt, mountain herbs, and black pepper, adding chopped cabbage and slices of boiled potatoes. The fat sizzles as the chicken browns, and steam rises with a savory hiss. The meal is simple but hearty. He eats standing at the counter, one hand holding the plate, the other lifting mug after mug of dark ale. Four in total—each one making the sting of his healing leg and swollen nose blur into warmth.

When the food is gone and the mugs empty, he lights his pipe, puffing until the smoke curls like old ghosts above his head. Then he shuffles into his library, the walls flickering in candlelight. He takes down a heavy tome bound in cracked black leather.

“The Cities of the Low Lands: Their Kings, Stones, and Silent Wars”

He flips through the pages, the dwarvish script inked in deep blue, the illustrations sharp.

“In the first age of the Low Lands, the city of Ebrath rose beside the River Eldrin, its streets paved with hexagonal basalt stones carried from the Shear Mountains. Its first king, Baerin Hollowmantle, was a stonemason by birth and a warrior by fate. He forged alliances with river clans by building bridges so strong they stood for five centuries, each arch bearing the name of the family who laid its base.”

Golar mutters as he reads, pipe clenched in his teeth.

“Now there was a king who built before he ruled.”

He turns another page.

“Haldrin, the Silent Bastion, built under a waterfall to hide its towers. The stone sang with rushing water. Its walls, shaped with sound-dampening flutes, were never breached. Its last queen, Oratha the Pale, vanished into the Deep Paths, seeking the origin of all stone.”

He leans back, smiling faintly.

“Mad as a goblin, that one. But the stone still stands.”

He reads until the candles burn low, until the warmth of the ale settles in his chest and the smoke clings to his beard. Then, without a word, he closes the book, blows out the light, and lets the stone carry him to sleep.

Obelisk

The next morning, Golar is seated at his table eating a plate of cold cabbage and pork when a knock sounds at the door—three hard raps, too clean to be a friend and too light to be a miner. He grunts and gets up, pipe still clamped between his teeth, opening the door with his usual scowl.

A young courier stands there, bundled in grey and black, a wax-sealed scroll in hand. The seal is unfamiliar at first—an eclipse encircled by runes—but something about it chills the morning air.

“Message for Golar, stonemason of the lower quarter,” the courier says, offering the scroll with both hands and then backing away quickly, as if the letter might burst into flames.

Golar shuts the door, breaks the seal, and slumps down behind his work desk. He unfurls the parchment, reading the dark ink in silence.

To Golar, Son of Gamin, Fifth Mason of the House of Stone:

The Order of the Black Dawn calls upon your craft.

At the base of Mount Hirngrim, an obelisk of stone awaits your chisel. The rock has been chosen, sanctified, and blessed in the names of the old gods. You are to carve it with the following images:

A coiled serpent devouring the sun
A tower of bones rising from waves
The eye of dusk—an unblinking gaze at the sky’s last light

Diagrams are enclosed. Begin within ten days. Payment in gold and offering.

—*By command of the Black Flame, Keeper of the First Night*

Golar runs a thick finger over the images. The sketches are stark, the lines sharp and ancient. The designs awaken something old in his blood. He leans back and mutters, “Now that’s a proper job... strange bastards, but they know their stone.”

He reaches for his mug, drains the last of his ale, and lets out a monstrous fart, the kind that echoes in a stone room and smells like a smithy’s forgotten stew. The stench hangs in the air like smoke.

“A contract worthy of gods... and smells like one too.”

A week passes in preparation. On the seventh day, he stands before his wooden chest again. With slow reverence, he lifts his armor piece by piece and straps it on. Chainmail, gloves, boots, helm—all tested and worn. He buckles his belt, sheathes his short sword, slings his shield over his back, and loads his carving tools into a broad-lidded wooden box. The iron hinges groan under its weight.

Climbing up through Felhedrin, he finds Knuckle the mule gnawing at a post, indifferent as always. Golar straps the box into the cart, mutters to himself, and mounts.

“Mountains never ask if you’re ready. They just wait to kill you slow.”

The ride out of the city is long and winding. The road narrows into rocky trails and moss-choked ruts. Mist crawls between pine trunks, and birds cry far off. Hours pass. He eats an apple from a pouch, tossing the core into the underbrush.

Then, on a muddy pass carved into the foot of the mountain, the cart wheels sink deep.

“Ah, damn it,” he growls.

He climbs down, knees deep in wet muck, and begins pushing. Knuckle groans in protest.

“Move, you lazy turd factory!” he growls, grabbing the reins and whipping them once. The mule lets out a strangled bray, hooves slipping. Golar shoves from behind, both feet sliding.

For half an hour he strains, shoving and cursing, until with a wet *squelch* the wheels break free. He’s smeared in mud, boots soaked, teeth clenched.

“You ever get stuck again, Knuckle, I swear I’ll turn you into stew.”

Eventually, the path rises, the air thins, and there it is.

The obelisk stands like a spearhead rising from the earth, untouched, half-emerged from the living rock. Ten feet tall and still crude, waiting to be called into shape. Around it, strange black cloths flap on poles. No one greets him. The Order, it seems, watches from afar.

He steps down, wipes his hands on his coat, and opens the box of tools. He draws his heaviest chisel and the broad hammer, inspecting their edges. Then he approaches the stone and sets his gloved hand on it.

“You’ve waited long, haven’t you?” he says aloud. “Well, now you’ve got me. Let’s see what sort of secrets you want me to carve out of your ribs.”

He marks the first lines—the coils of the serpent, the circular sun. The hammer falls with a thud that echoes across the ridge. Chips fly, dust lifts, and the mountain begins to sing beneath the strikes.

And as he works, he mutters to himself.

“They want gods here... symbols of death and dark. But stone don’t care for worship. It cares for weight, for shape, for memory. I’ll give them what they ask... and it’ll be real enough to scare the new gods out of hiding.”

The days pass in rhythm and sweat.

Each morning, Golar rises stiffly from his bed of moss, the smell of old pine and earth clinging to his beard. He stokes the small fire he builds every night with driftwood and dried roots, eats a chunk of bread, drinks cold water from his waterskin, then walks to the obelisk and begins again.

The stone responds slowly. The coiled serpent takes shape first, winding in perfect symmetry around the rising sun. Then comes the tower of bones—each vertebra carved with careful cuts, rising from chiseled waves. Last is the eye, wide and staring, set in a recessed alcove on the upper face of the monument. Golar speaks little as he works, only to the stone, or to himself.

“You like makin’ me sweat for every inch, don’t you?” he growls one afternoon, wiping dust from his brow. “Just like Ma used to say—*stone’s honest, but never generous.*”

By the seventh day, the carving is nearly done. The last details of the eye of dusk are being refined under his chisel, the hammer falling with a precise rhythm. Sweat drips from his brow onto the mountain soil.



Then the air changes.

A heavy, damp stink rolls in from the east, carried on a gust that doesn't belong. Golar stiffens, lifts his head. Behind the ridge, something moves—trees snapping, earth thudding under massive weight.

Then comes the voice—guttural and broken.

“Bad dwarf... in mountains... steal and... break stones...”

A massive shadow lumbers into view. A mountain troll, at least twelve feet tall, covered in warts and patches of moss. Its eyes are yellow pits, its jaw dangling with crooked tusks.

“Dwarf dies now.”

It charges before Golar can even drop his hammer.

“Shit—”

The blow comes like a boulder. The troll's arm slams into Golar's side and hurls him against the obelisk. The impact cracks his ribs and sends him sprawling, stars bursting in his vision.

He coughs, blood spilling from his mouth, and rolls just as the troll's foot crashes down where his head was. He tries to rise, but the beast grabs him by the chest and slams him into the ground again and again.

“BREAK YOU! BREAK DWARF!”

Bones crackle. His vision swims. The troll's massive hand clamps around his throat and begins to squeeze. Golar's arms flail for his sword—he grabs the hilt, yanks it free, and with a furious scream plunges it upward into the troll's shoulder.

“RAAAAAAAGH!”



The beast roars in pain and releases him. Golar scrambles to his feet, only for the troll to backhand him so hard he flies against a rock. His boot tears, ankle twisting, blood pouring from a gash across his chest. His left arm hangs limp—broken.

“Come on, you mountain-born bastard,” Golar wheezes, standing, sword wobbling in his hand. “You want a corpse, you’ll have to earn it.”

The troll charges again, swinging wildly. Golar ducks the first blow, drives his sword into the troll's thigh, then pulls out a chisel and jams it deep into its knee. The beast howls and swings again—this time catching Golar's face. His nose shatters with a sickening crack.

Staggering, barely conscious, Golar reaches for his belt and grabs the pointed hammer he uses for stone etching.

As the troll lifts both hands to crush him, Golar lunges and drives the pointed hammer straight into the beast's eye.

“DIE, YOU ROTTEN PILE OF MUD!”

The troll shrieks, stumbles back, crashes into a tree, and collapses with a final, twitching groan.

Golar drops his tools and falls to the ground beside the obelisk, bloodied and broken. He doesn't even feel the impact. Blackness takes him.

Hours pass. The fire near his camp has burned to cold ash. Then, slowly, with a groan from the pit of his chest, Golar wakes.

“Still alive... stupidly.”

He reaches into his coat, finds the corked flask of red healing potion, and drinks it. The taste is bitter and burns going down, but the warmth that spreads through his limbs is enough to make him sit up, blinking through dried blood.

His arm still aches and his nose is crooked, but the bleeding slows, and his breath steadies.

With trembling fingers, he picks up his chisel again and turns to the obelisk.

“Can't leave you half-blind, can I?”

He finishes the last lines of the eye, makes the final smoothing pass on the tower of bones, and then, dragging his tools one by one, packs them into the wooden box. His hands shake. His leg aches. His chest feels like cracked timber.

But the work is done.

Knuckle, miraculously, is still waiting near the cart, chewing bark from a low branch. Golar lashes the box down, straps himself into the cart, and begins the long, rattling ride down the mountain.

Every bump makes him wince. Mud splashes his face. Wind chills the drying blood on his beard.

But he grins.

“Stone's carved. Troll's dead. And I've still got one mug left at home.”

The cart creaks and rattles down the winding forest path, the wheel spokes caked in dried mud and pine needles. Golar leans back in the driver's seat, bruised, bandaged, and sore in every joint. The mountain air has begun to warm, and the trees thicken on either side of the road.

A rustle. A howl. Two grey shapes burst from the underbrush, snarling, teeth bared.

Knuckle screams—an awful, high-pitched bray—as the wolves leap at him. One clamps onto the mule’s leg, the other bites into its flank, snarling and thrashing.

“CAN’T I BE LEFT ALONE, YOU BEASTS OF THE CURSED MUDHOLE!” Golar roars, leaping from the wagon.

His sword’s already in his hand, still sticky with dried troll blood. He charges, limping, howling like a madman.

The first wolf turns and lunges. Golar meets it with steel, slashing across its snout. The beast yelps and backs off, circling. The second wolf doesn’t relent, still tearing into Knuckle’s haunch. Golar lunges and drives the sword deep into its ribs.

The wolf turns on him with a dying snarl and sinks its teeth into his thigh. He screams in pain, drops to one knee, and punches it with the pommel of his sword until its skull cracks and it goes still.

The first wolf leaps, fangs wide—its weight knocks Golar onto his back. Claws rake his chest, biting through cloth. He stabs upward wildly, once, twice—on the third strike, the sword pierces the beast’s heart. It gives one last horrible breath and goes limp atop him.

Golar lies beneath the weight of the dead wolf, wheezing, blood oozing from a dozen new wounds. His beard is matted, his left hand still limp and bound from the troll fight.

He pushes the carcass off with a pained grunt, staggers to the cart, and hauls himself onto the back.

Lying flat across his tool chest, he raises his voice with what little breath he has.

“Home, Knuckle... take me home!”

Miraculously, the mule limps forward, whimpering but obedient, dragging the wagon slowly back toward Felhedrin.

Hours pass in haze and agony.

When they finally reach the stall, dusk has returned. Golar rolls off the cart like a sack of coal, hits the dirt hard, and growls. He lifts his tool chest with his good arm, descends to the stone city, limps across the courtyard, and pushes open his front door.

Inside, the warmth of the hearth is long faded, and dust lingers in the air. He drops the tools with a heavy thud and collapses face-first onto the thick boar hide rug, his blood mixing with old fur.

“By all that’s holy and unholy,” he mutters, voice muffled. “I’m done...”

He drags himself to the bed like a dying ox and drops onto it, armor still on. He doesn’t move.

For two days, Golar sleeps.

When he finally wakes, the light burns his eyes. His stomach growls like a beast, and his bones creak with protest. He rises slowly, wraps his ribs with a linen bandage, and staggers into the kitchen.

He eats everything in reach—old bread, jerky, a dried onion, even half a wheel of cheese that smells like socks. He downs five mugs of ale in steady succession, each followed by a groan and a muttered curse.

Then he sits at the table, unwraps his wounds, and dabs them with crushed green herbs and strips of moss soaked in bitter rootwater. His left hand, still broken, throbs like fire.

“Can’t hammer stone like this,” he grumbles.

He pulls on a cloak, slings the arm in a makeshift sling, and limps through the undercity to the healer’s hollow. The old dwarven healer, Mistress Bruna, clicks her tongue the moment she sees him.

“Golar, what in the deepest vein have you done this time?”

“Mountain, troll, wolves. Nothing out of the ordinary,” he rasps.

She examines his arm, pokes his ribs, shakes her head.

“You’ve bent yourself like a pickaxe in a goblin’s grip. Hold still.”

With a snap and a deep crack, she sets the bone. Golar growls through gritted teeth, not quite roaring, not quite passing out.

She ties it up tight with splints and fresh linen.

“No hammering for two weeks. And no fighting trolls.”

“I’ll consider the second one,” he mutters.

Back home, he returns in slow, heavy steps, opens the door, and leans against the frame, breathing in the scent of his stone walls and the still air.

“Home,” he mutters. “No more gods. No more beasts. Just stone.”

He shuts the door behind him and lets the silence settle once again.

The days pass slowly, and Golar allows them to. His bones knit together with stubborn dwarven resolve, his bruises fading from black to yellow, and the ache in his chest slowly dulling. His left hand, bound and rested, begins to twitch and flex again with new strength. Though far from full strength, he can at least grip a mug without wincing.

A week later, with the warmth of the hearth crackling behind him and the scent of smoke and stone in the air, Golar feels something stir—not in his muscles, but in his mind. It’s an urge not to chisel, but to *record*.

He lights a thick beeswax candle and places it in the iron sconce above his desk. From the bottom drawer he pulls out a leather-bound book, the cover rough and untouched, the pages inside crisp and empty. He opens it, takes up a thick ink quill, and scratches a title across the first page in bold, steady strokes:

Techniques of Felhedrin Stonemasonry

By Golar, Son of Gamin, Fifth of the Line of Stone

He leans back, takes a long gulp of dark ale from his stone-handled mug, then sets the quill to paper again, the words pouring from him like well-tapped springwater.

“Lesson One: The Listening Stone”

Stone speaks. Not in tongues or whispers, but in echo, tension, and grain. To know stone is to press your palm against it and feel where it wants to go. The hammer is not the master—it is the interpreter. Never strike before listening. Knock gently first. If it sings, it is ready. If it echoes, it hides a secret crack. Wait.

“Lesson Two: Cut with Purpose”

Never carve what you don’t need. Every cut is a weakness until it becomes a shape. Measure twice, mark once, and strike like you mean to leave something behind. A lazy line invites collapse. A careful one supports generations.

“Lesson Three: Mortar is Memory”

The best mortar isn’t just about strength—it’s about breath. Clay, lime, and sand, yes, but also the heat and the wait. Mortar too fast and it cracks in frost. Mortar too slow and it softens. Treat it like stew. Let it settle into the gaps and cure with patience.

He writes into the evening, pausing only to refill his mug. His ink-stained fingers move with purpose, and for the first time in weeks, he feels no pain—only the warmth of creation.

Later, the hunger hits like a hammer. He rises from the desk, cracks his back with a grunt, and ambles into the kitchen.

He pulls from the pantry a block of molded cheese—blue-veined and sharp, a specialty made by Morla, a dwarf widow three doors down, who ages her cheese in stone cellars and wraps them in ash bark. He slices it thick, grabs a loaf of brown bread, lays on a ripe tomato, and bites in like a starving beast.

“By the Forge, that’s taste,” he mumbles, crumbs scattering over the counter. “Sharp as chisel’s edge.”

Belly full, he returns to the main room and kneels at the hearth. The fire’s burned low, so he stacks fresh wood with methodical care and strikes flint to kindling. Within minutes, warmth blossoms through the room, the flames casting amber light on the walls, making the carved stone reliefs dance again.

Golar sighs and leans back, removing the torn boot from his troll encounter. The sole is half-flapping, the leather sliced and stiff with dried blood.

“Rest well, you sorry thing. You served.”

He limps over to his wardrobe and pulls out another pair—stout black leather, steel toes, and embossed dwarven runes on the heel. His spare boots, old but loyal.

Sliding them on, he wiggles his toes with satisfaction.

“Fit like stone in its niche.”

He glances at the fire, then at the book on the desk, its ink still drying, the candle dancing beside it.

“Not just stone to carve, now,” he mutters. “Stone to teach. Stone to remember.”

And with that, he returns to the desk, dips his quill once more, and begins the next lesson.

The morning sun filters through the high vents in Golar’s stone ceiling, painting golden slits across the floor as he sips lukewarm water and chews absently on a hunk of bread. His wounds still throb, but they’ve closed, and his left hand flexes a little more with each passing day. Just as he sets down his cup, a knock taps sharply at the door—three crisp raps, official and no-nonsense.

He opens it to find the same young courier from before, clad in black and grey, pale beneath his hood.

“Payment from the Order of the Black Dawn,” the courier says, handing over a small coin pouch with a seal in black wax. “For services rendered at Mount Hirngrim.”

Golar weighs the pouch. Not much.

“Fifty gold?” he mutters. “Should’ve charged extra for troll guts.”

The courier shrugs awkwardly and quickly retreats.

Later that morning, another knock comes—but this one is softer, almost musical. Golar opens the door to find Gala standing there, basket in hand, curls bouncing as she grins up at him.

“Time to stretch your legs, Master Stoneface. We’re going to market.”

He raises a brow. “You buying bricks?”

“Nope. Bread, berries, and maybe something frilly. Come on.”

He grumbles but grabs his coin pouch and follows.

The market square is already alive with color and noise. Stalls packed shoulder to shoulder hawk everything from vegetables to trinkets carved from bone. A halfling butcher sharpens his cleaver with flair, tossing chunks of meat to passing dogs. A dwarven tanner displays belts lined with polished brass buckles. Nearby, an elven woman sells incense that smells like pine smoke and citrus, her hands dancing as she explains the spiritual significance of each stick.

A human couple argues over the price of honeycomb while a gnome child chases a goose in frantic circles. A bard strums a lute beneath a faded awning, singing a song about a lovesick miner and a ghost that stole his beard.

Gala darts between stalls with practiced ease, picking out bundles of herbs, dried fish, and a round of white cheese wrapped in cloth. She stops at a dressmaker's booth and holds up a pale green tunic.

"What do you think?" she asks.

Golar eyes it. "Not bad. You'll look like a lettuce."

She laughs and buys it anyway, along with a pair of small, buckled shoes.

Back at Golar's home, the hearth is warm, the air scented with dried herbs and lingering smoke. Gala sets the pies on the table—meat filled with peppered pork and berry ones that bleed juice across the crust.

She pours herbal tea into mismatched cups. Golar takes a bite of the meat pie and grunts in appreciation.

"These're good. Crunchy crust. Spiced right. Not too fancy."

"Made them yesterday," Gala says. "And you—you said you had a story?"

Golar leans back, pipe in hand. "Troll," he begins. "Big. Warty. Spoke like it was gargling rocks. Nearly snapped me in half."

Gala's eyes widen. "By the gods..."

"Then wolves. Two of them. Went after Knuckle. Nearly tore the mule apart. I've got more cuts than a butcher's block."

She sets her cup down with trembling hands. "That's it. I'm never going near the mountains. You dwarves are mad."

Golar chuckles. "The stone calls. And sometimes it tries to eat you."

Gala shakes her head but smiles all the same. After another cup of tea, she rises and gives him a brief hug.

"Don't die before I visit again."

"No promises," he mutters as she walks off into the dusk.

He closes the door and turns back toward his desk, only for another knock to echo through the stone halls. He groans and opens the door again—another courier, this one older and dressed in guild brown. He hands over a rolled scroll bound in copper thread and leaves without a word.

Golar sighs, returns to his desk, and unrolls it carefully. The parchment reads:

To Golar, Son of Gamin—Master Mason of the Fifth Hall

You are hereby invited to attend the Stonemasons' Guild Celebration of the Millennial Remembrance of Ordodad the Fifth, whose stonecutting in the Great King's Halls brought honor to our craft and legacy to Felhedrin.

Your presence is required. Formal tunic and guild seal expected.

—*Guild Council of Hammermark Hall*

Golar sets the scroll down, scratches at his beard, and lets out a grunt.

“Of course they’d hold a celebration for a stonecutter that’s been dead eight hundred years. And of course we all have to wear the damn formal greys.”

He leans back in his chair, sips the last of Gala’s tea, and mutters, “Still... he was a fine mason. Worth a toast. Suppose I’ll go. Wouldn’t be right to miss it.”

The fire crackles in the hearth, the obelisk now behind him, the next steps already rising like a fresh foundation beneath his feet.

The Celebration

The evening of the guild celebration arrives with a dusky warmth, the stone vents above Felhedrin casting shafts of fading light through the tunnel mouths. Golar stands in his bedroom, frowning into a small polished shard of mirror as he straightens his cleanest tunic—grey wool brushed free of stone dust, its shoulders broad and its collar stiff. Over his chest he pins the iron guild seal: a chisel crossed over an archway, ringed by the runes of Hammermark Hall.

He pulls on dark trousers, boots buffed just enough to not look like they survived a one month march, and fastens his heavy leather belt with the engraved clasp passed down from his grandfather. He eyes himself with mild displeasure.

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He pulls on dark trousers, boots buffed just enough to not look like they survived a troll attack, and fastens his heavy leather belt with the engraved clasp passed down from his grandfather. He eyes himself with mild displeasure.

“Still looks like someone hammered my face,” he mutters, lighting his pipe.

In the kitchen, he uncorks a jug of dark ale and drains a mug in one deep gulp, then exhales through his nose, smoke curling into the air.

“Alright. Let’s get it over with.”

He saddles Knuckle with a simple harness—no tools tonight—and guides the mule up through the winding roads to the guild district. The air buzzes with lanternlight and distant laughter. When he arrives at the large granite hall of the Stonemasons’ Guild, the stone steps echo with voices and the warm hum of gathering.

Inside, the great hall glows with torchlight and the slow pulse of magic runes carved into the ceiling. The space is broad, the walls covered in carved murals of dwarves lifting columns, bracing arches, and holding flaming hammers aloft. A long wooden table stretches across the center, already lined with mugs, roasted meats, and fresh loaves. Ale barrels are tapped at both ends, and the smell of root stew and charred lamb fills the air.

About forty people are present—mostly dwarves, their beards oiled and braided for the occasion. A few human stonemasons mingle, along with town clerks in green robes, guild scribes with ink-stained fingers, and a pair of elven builders from the northern districts, looking mildly overwhelmed.

Golar steps in quietly, nodding to those he knows. Dresa raises her mug in greeting. Harven, already three ales deep, calls out, “Golar! You look almost respectable!”

“Don’t get used to it,” Golar replies, finding a spot near the end of the table.

A bard sits near the hearth, strumming a slow tune on a deep-bodied lute. The melody is old, dwarven, full of deep notes and trailing phrases, like footsteps echoing in deep halls.

The chatter quiets as the Guildmaster, an elder dwarf named Barlin Dustvein, stands at the head of the table and raises a silver goblet.

“Brothers and sisters of stone,” Barlin says, voice rough but firm, “tonight we honor not just a craft—but a legacy.”

The room stills.

“Ordodad the Fifth,” Barlin continues, “cut the King’s Halls not with speed, nor with pride, but with care. His arches hold after eight hundred years. His vaults still echo with the breath of the mountain. He did not carve for coin. He carved to *last*.”

Murmurs of agreement ripple across the room. Some raise mugs. Golar nods slightly.

“We honor him not by tale alone—but by keeping our work honest. Straight lines. True joints. Deep foundations. That is our inheritance. And by the gods, let no one in this hall forget it.”

“Aye!” several voices ring out.

Barlin lifts his mug. “To Ordodad the Fifth—stonecutter, hall-builder, brother of the chisel!”

Everyone raises their mugs and drinks.

After the toast, the conversation flows like the ale. Golar finds himself between Dresa and Mireek the gnome, who's waving his hands excitedly.

"Did you ever see the eastern stairwell Ordodad did?" Mireek says. "The double spiral? No mortar. Not a drop. Held together by sheer weight and wizardry!"

"Aye," Dresa says, nodding. "And the flood runnels in the banquet hall—cut at a seven-degree slant. They still drain clean."

Golar drinks, then says, "He had hands like gods. Every strike was pre-measured. My da used to say the mountain *moved* for him."

Mireek laughs. "I wish the mountain moved for *me*. I just get backache and chipped nails."

The bard begins a faster tune, and two of the younger masons start a stamping rhythm under the table, clanking mugs in time. Laughter fills the hall, the smell of roasted roots and fried onions rising with the music.

Someone spills a jug. Someone else sings loudly off-key. Barlin sits back, watching his kin with pride and a hint of tears in his old eyes.

Golar leans on the table, sipping his fourth mug, feeling a rare warmth in his chest not born from fire or drink alone.

He mutters quietly to himself, "Well, Ordodad... you built halls that lasted. Here's to tryin' to do the same."

The celebration swells like a rising forge flame. The barrels at either end of the hall are half-drained now, their taps leaking foam onto the flagstone floor. Mugs clang together in endless toasts, and laughter rolls through the chamber like thunder over mountain ridges.

Golar leans back on the bench, his fifth—or sixth—mug in hand, eyes heavy with drink but still watching the room like a mason judging the lines of a wall. He's not alone in his ale-soaked state. Down the long wooden table, voices rise louder, sharper, the sound no longer just merriment but something harder beneath the laughter.

Two dwarves at the far end of the bench—both wide-shouldered, thick-browed masons from the eastern quarry—are locked in a heated dispute. One with a red beard braided into four points, the other with a head shaved smooth and a belt of engraved chisels.

"I'm tellin' you, Ordodad *angled* the southern pillar inward by two degrees," the bald one yells, slamming his mug down and sloshing ale across the table.

"Two degrees my arse!" the red-bearded dwarf snaps, standing half up. "It was a true vertical! He never angled nothin', he *cut around a fault line*! You been sniffin' lime dust too long!"

"Don't call me a liar, Berrik, you stone-headed bastard!"

“Liar? I’m sayin’ you don’t know your own ass from a plumb bob!”

A mug flies—foaming and half-full—it crashes into the red-bearded dwarf’s face, soaking his long whiskers in sticky beer. With a growl, he lunges across the table, grabs the bald dwarf by the beard, and *yanks* him clear off the bench. The hall erupts with gasps and hoots.

“Let go, you drunk ox!” the bald one screams as he’s dragged to the floor, boots flailing.

The two roll, fists flying, the red-beard straddling him and raining punches. One lands square on the nose—blood spurts, and someone yells, “He got the snout! Bleedin’ like a cracked keg!”

Benches scrape back, dwarves hoot and laugh, and a few stand like they’re ready to jump in. But then—

WHAM!

A thunderous crack rings out as Guildmaster Barlin Dustvein slams his ceremonial wooden hammer onto the table with a force that rattles mugs and silences the room.

“ENOUGH!” he bellows. “No fighting in the Guild’s hall! You want to trade fists, do it in the pit or the quarry! Not here, not on Ordodad’s night!”

The bald dwarf, blood smeared across his cheek, growls, “He pulled my beard like I was a goblin runt!”

“And you threw ale like a coward,” Barlin snaps back. “Out! Now.”

A pair of broad-shouldered scribes—bigger than most—escort the bald dwarf to the door. He curses the whole way out, shouting, “Still two degrees! Still two!”

The doors slam shut behind him.

The room holds still for a beat... and then, like the pressure released from a kettle, the celebration surges back to life. Ale sloshes again. A group near the hearth starts stomping in rhythm to the bard’s wild lute tune. The old song “Stone and Flame” rises in volume, half the room singing loudly and off-key.

Golar watches it all, smirking, raising his mug.

“To truth, fists, and bad measurements,” he mutters, and drinks deep.

Dresa slides in beside him, grinning. “Reminds me of my third guild feast. Two broken noses and a spilled stew. Tradition’s still strong, eh?”

“Aye,” Golar says. “You can build cities with dwarves, but you’ll never stop ‘em from punchin’ each other over stone.”

As the celebration begins to mellow and the music fades into slower tunes, a tall man wrapped in black robes steps from the edge of the guild hall shadows and approaches Golar’s

end of the table. The flickering torchlight glints off the red emblem on the man's chest—a flaming torch, embroidered with threads that catch the glow like embers. His face is pale, lined, but calm, and his voice is smooth like riverstone.

“Golar, son of Gamin?”

Golar glances sideways, eyes slightly bleary from ale. “Aye. Who’s askin’? You’re not here to talk about plumb lines, are you?”

The man smiles faintly. “No. I represent the Order of the Flaming Torch. Our temple—an ancient place, 3,500 years old—requires the hands of a true master mason. Several of its inner pillars have cracked with time, and sacred symbols must be re-carved in the sanctuary. We need a craftsman, not a laborer.”

Golar sits up straighter, pipe clenched in his teeth. “Old stone, eh? That’s speakin’ my language. What’s the coin?”

“Three hundred gold pieces,” the man replies without blinking. “And twenty silver. Half upon arrival. The rest when the work is complete.”

Golar grunts. “That’ll do. I’ll come by in a week, see your holy stone and kiss it better.”

The man nods once, bows, and vanishes into the lantern-lit crowd without a word more.

When the celebration ends, Golar stumbles out, arms heavy, stomach warm. He manages to climb into his cart, slaps Knuckle lightly on the flank, and mumbles, “Home, mule. Don’t fail me now...”

The cart bumps along the quiet night roads. When they reach the stall, he feeds Knuckle a small sack of oats and pats the beast's head. “You did well tonight. Drank less than I did.”

He stumbles through the stone alleys, opens his door, collapses onto the nearest bench, and is snoring within minutes, still dressed.

The next morning, his skull throbs like a mallet striking copper. He groans, eats a raw onion to chase the headache (a dwarven trick), washes his face with cold water, and gears up.

He dons his leather apron, work shirt, greaves, and thick boots. Tools are packed with care—chisels, mallet, straightedge, pick, square, brushes, chalk string, and a fresh pot of mortar clay. He also puts his armor and weapon in a cloth sack and takes it with him.

Knuckle is already standing in the stall, as if expecting the hangover-laden dwarf.

“Don’t give me that look,” Golar grumbles, strapping the box down. “We’ve got pillars to fix.”

The city is already stirring as they roll through its waking veins. Stone towers rise around him, their rooftops alive with morning pigeons. Felhedrin’s walls gleam in the early light, damp with dew, and vendors begin shouting from their stalls.

A baker swings open his shutters and the smell of flour and fire drifts into the air. Children run through the cobbled lanes kicking a hoop and stick. Masons in dusty aprons argue over load angles beside a scaffolding frame. A bard tunes a violin under a carved archway where pigeons nest beside etched runes of wind and rain.

Golar nods as he passes a facade he knows well—arched buttresses reinforced by steel rods, the joints cut so clean they look polished even after two hundred years.

“Good cuts,” he mutters. “Held through three earthquakes.”

At the end of a wide road, nestled against a steep cliff face, rises the temple of the Flaming Torch. Its facade is weathered but proud, the stonework marked by age and wind. The entryway arches are Romanesque in character—thick semicircular vaults with deeply recessed columns and chevron moldings. A pair of guardian statues flank the door—men holding torches, their faces eroded into anonymity.

Golar steps down, ties Knuckle, grabs his tool chest, and enters.

Inside, the air is cooler. The space opens into a nave lined by rows of massive pillars, most cylindrical, some squared and worn. Light filters through slit windows high on the wall, casting a pale gold haze. The ceilings are groin vaulted, each rib intersecting with heavy weight above carved capitals.

He walks slowly, trailing a hand along a cracked base. The stone here is dark, a hard limestone, veined with age. The wear is deep—edges rounded, corners settled. In one section, a pillar leans just slightly, and a diagonal crack climbs from floor to vault like a creeping vine.

From the rear chamber, a voice calls out. “Master Golar, I presume.”

A robed man—another of the Order—approaches with a parchment in hand. “These are the symbols the brethren wish carved anew. You’ll find four pillars need stabilizing, and the sanctuary vault has shifted. The iconography must match the old style. We have rubbings from the original altar relief.”

Golar takes the parchment, studies the sigils—flames wrapping into knotwork, eyes inside sunbursts, and a torch encircled by a serpent swallowing its tail.

“Old symbols. Deep carving. Not the kind you rush.”

“Of course,” the robed man says. “We want it exact.”

Golar kneels at one cracked pillar base and taps it gently with his hammer. The dull note that comes back makes him grimace.

“She’s hollowed inside. Load’s been uneven for too long. If you don’t want this roof in your soup bowl, I need to build new compression plates, braced under each capstone.”

He stands and brushes his beard. “Good job for a week. Maybe ten days. I’ll need scaffolds, clean water, and no priests sneakin’ behind me muttering spells.”

“You’ll have space,” the robed man assures. “And coin.”

Golar sets his box down with a grunt, rolls his shoulders, and grips his hammer.

“Then let’s start carving back time.”

Day after day, Golar toils within the sacred gloom of the Temple of the Flaming Torch. The chisel is once again his voice, his rhythm, and his reply to the silent stone. Each morning begins with mortar mixing, a survey of the four cracked pillars, and careful reconstruction of the pressure lines between base and capital. With a small brush, he cleans the age-darkened surfaces, then carves the holy symbols with patient strokes—the coiling flames, the staring sun-eyes, and the torch in its endless circle.

No spellwork accompanies him, only sweat and dust. The Order’s robed members keep their distance, watching silently from the nave’s shadowed edge. Golar pays them no mind.

On the eighth day, while mortar settles in the joints, Golar ventures deeper into the side halls in search of clean water for the next batch. He descends a worn stone staircase tucked behind a column—one not marked on his task scroll. The steps spiral downward, colder with each turn, lit only by a shaft of light from above.

At the bottom, he finds a heavy stone door, carved with unfamiliar sigils, its surface chipped by time and partially ajar. Beyond it, a tunnel stretches into still blackness, lined with ancient flagstones slick with moss.

Golar stares into the dark, eyes narrowing. “Not on the plans... Not in the records... And yet, stone still breathes down here.”

He turns back, finishes his work for the day, and as evening falls, he gears himself for whatever lies beyond. In his quarters beside the sanctuary, he dons his mail shirt, buckles his boots, fastens his belt and sword, and grabs his hammer. He shoulders a sack of rations and flint, then descends once more.

He takes a torch from the wall bracket and lights it. The flame sputters, then flares bright, casting long shadows across the arched stone.

The tunnel yawns ahead, ancient and silent.

Golar steps forward, muttering, “Let’s see what the Order forgot to mention.”

As he walks, dust swirls in the torchlight. After some distance, he stumbles upon the first sign of something long buried: six skeletal figures slumped across the ground, armored in rusted mail and clashing shattered swords. Spider webs stretch across the passage like forgotten veils.

He kneels beside one, brushing away dust.

“Old bones... no crest on the helm. Forgotten soldiers, maybe.”

But the silence breaks.



The webs tremble. The air turns cold.

A sound—dry, cracking like old branches—rattles through the hall as the skeletons begin to rise. One lifts a rusted axe, another a jagged blade still crusted with old blood. Six sets of hollow sockets fix on Golar with empty, soulless intent.

“By the stone’s black heart—no peace for the dead, is there?”

The first skeleton charges. Golar sidesteps, swinging his hammer low—it connects with the shin, shattering the leg in a puff of bone dust. Another comes from the side, sword slashing; Golar blocks with his shield, then drives his hammer into the skull, splintering it into fragments.

He turns just in time to catch a mace blow against his shoulder—it glances off his mail, but the force sends him stumbling. The third and fourth close in. He slashes with his short sword, slicing through a spine. A bony hand grabs his arm—he headbutts the skull, breaking it with a crunch.

A fifth skeleton stabs low, cutting into his thigh. Golar grunts, then roars, gripping the blade with his gauntlet and pulling the creature close—he drives his hammer down into the collarbone, snapping the ribcage like dry wood.

Only one remains. It leaps wildly—he blocks with the shield and, with a furious bellow, slams the hammer straight through its skull and into the stone floor beneath. The bones clatter apart in a final rattle.

Breathing hard, blood seeping through his trousers, Golar plants the torch upright and leans on his hammer. He gathers 10 gold from the skeletons.

“Stone take me... even the dead want a piece of me.”

He presses on.

The tunnel narrows and descends further, and the walls begin to shift—no longer just brick and mortar, but ancient carved reliefs. He passes stone pillars etched with spiral patterns and faded murals showing masked figures bearing torches, offering flame to a pool of still water.

The sound of dripping water grows louder, steady now. And beneath it, a low hum rises—deep, resonant, like a distant horn blowing endlessly through the earth itself.

Golar mutters under his breath as he walks, torch held high.

“This isn’t just a storage shaft... this was once sacred. Old gods. Old blood.”

The air thickens, the stone darker, as he walks deeper into the forgotten depths.

The humming grows deeper, pulsing like a heartbeat through stone as Golar advances into the darkened corridor. The torch in his hand flickers, its flame bending unnaturally as he reaches a wide chamber cut into the living rock. The ceiling arches high above, held by massive stone ribs carved with symbols of vigilance and binding oaths. Dust hangs in the air like frozen breath.

At the chamber's center stands a figure clad in spectral plate, tarnished but unbroken—its edges shimmer with ghostly light. A blackened shield hangs on its arm, runes etched in dead languages, and in its other hand, a longsword forged of crackling, flickering silver and shadow.

Its helm lifts slowly. Hollow sockets blaze with cold blue light.

“I am the Crypt Warden,” it intones, voice like steel dragged across tombstone. “None shall pass. None shall disturb the sacred rest.”

Golar mutters, tightening his grip on his sword. “Of course. Of *course* you’re still standin’ after three millennia.”

The Warden steps forward.

“You wear the dust of trespass, dwarf. Your blood will renew the ward.”

It lunges.

The sword swings fast—unnaturally fast. Golar raises his shield and barely deflects the first strike, but the force knocks him backward. Pain lances through his shoulder as radiant light scorches through the shield rim, and black heat follows, necrotic and biting.

“Damn thing smites and curses in the same breath!” Golar roars.

He charges, sword flashing. His blade clashes against the Warden's armor, ringing out like a bell. The Warden does not flinch.

Instead, it slashes downward—Golar dodges, the sword grazing his chainmail with radiant fire that burns into his side. He grits his teeth and responds with a low sweep, catching the Warden's leg. Spectral armor cracks slightly, and the undead knight staggers a half-step.

But Golar feels it too—when he struck, pain lanced up his arm. Radiant backlash from the Warden's cursed shield.



“Stone damn it—hurts just to *hit* him!”

The Crypt Warden raises its sword overhead. “Oathbreaker Smite.”

The blade descends in a blur of silver and shadow. Golar rolls aside as the ground where he stood explodes in light, stone cracking and smoking. The air screams. Dust showers the chamber.

Breathing hard, blood trickling from his side, Golar snarls. “Not today, you shimmering grave-walker!”

He darts in low, ducking the next slash, and drives his sword up under the Warden's armpit—finding a gap. The blade sinks in. The Warden cries out, a deep, echoing wail of agony.

The spectral shield flares—radiant light bursts, searing Golar's skin—but he holds on, twisting the blade. With a final, gritted roar, he rips it free, and the Warden staggers.

“You have... no right...” the Warden rasps.

Golar raises his sword, limping, and growls, “You had a right. Now you’ve had a rest. Stay *down*.”

He drives the blade through the chestplate.

The Warden gives a low exhale, blue light dimming in its eyes, and the armor collapses into a heap of dust and flickering silver sparks. He gathers 20 gold from it.

Silence returns to the chamber.

Golar stumbles, his armor scorched and his arms shaking. He picks up the torch again and limps toward the back wall where a narrow tunnel leads leftward. He follows it in silence, the echo of his breath and boots the only company.

Eventually, he enters a second chamber, smaller, domed with smooth stone. The air is still. A great stone sarcophagus rests in the center, its surface covered in intricate carvings. On its lid, a figure is etched in relief—robed, faceless, hands crossed over a torch held upside down.

Golar lowers the torch slightly, sweat and blood streaking his face.

“Well,” he mutters, voice gravel-thick, “either this is where the story ends, or it’s just startin’ to get interesting...”

Golar stands before the ancient sarcophagus, the torchlight trembling in his hand. The carvings are so finely done, so ancient, it feels almost wrong to look upon them too long—faces half-hidden in flame motifs, a torch held upside-down in the hands of the figure atop the lid. His fingers hover over the stone’s edge.

“This could be one of theirs,” he mutters. “One of the first—some high torchbearer from when the Order still whispered to mountains...”

He breathes deeply, sweat mingling with dust and blood on his face. “A mason don’t disturb rest. That’s the code. We build the tombs, not rob them.”

He backs away, fists clenched.

But the silence breaks once more.

From the cracks in the walls, from the hollows in the ceiling, a horrible *sound* begins—low at first, then rising into an unholy harmony. Dozens of voices moaning in jagged, overlapping tones, part wind, part pain, all *wrong*.

Golar spins, torch whipping in the air—and there they come.

Floating skulls. Jawbones clicking in rhythm. A mass of bone fragments and teeth, swirling together in a grotesque, howling spiral. Their eye sockets glow with flickering green light, and their mouths open and close in ghostly chorus.

“By the Forge... not again.”

The Bone Choir strikes.

The psychic wail hits Golar like a hammer to the soul. He drops to one knee, vision spinning, mind reeling as the dissonant harmony claws at his sanity. He tries to swing, but his hand shakes—his breath ragged.

A voice sings inside his skull, words without meaning, like a lullaby turned inside out.

He staggers to his feet and swings his torch, burning three skulls from the air, but more take their place. A jaw clamps down on his shoulder—necrotic energy pulses through him, searing his nerves.

He screams.

They swirl around him, a vortex of clacking teeth and haunting melody. He draws his sword, tries to focus.

“FOCUS!”

He lashes out, slicing through three, then ducks low, slams his shield into another wave. Still, the song continues—discordant, endless, maddening.

He drops to his knees again, ears bleeding, shouting, “Shut your cursed mouths!”

With a final roar, he thrusts his sword upward in a spinning arc, slicing through the heart of the swarm. Bone fragments scatter in all directions like broken instruments hurled against stone. The song fades... slowly... into silence.

He leans on his sword, chest heaving.

“Alright. Enough mercy...”

He turns to the sarcophagus again. His face is pale, eyes bloodshot.

“You’ve been here three thousand years,” he whispers. “No one even remembers you’re here. You’re not holy anymore. You’re forgotten.”

He grips the lid and pushes.

Stone groans. Dust spills.

And the lid slides aside.

Inside lies a skeleton draped in ceremonial robes, dark red and black, now rotted and clinging to the bones like faded parchment. A silver amulet rests on the ribcage, carved with the inverted torch of the Order.

But as Golar leans closer, a pulse of dark energy bursts from the body—an invisible force that strikes him in the chest and sinks deep.

His eyes widen.

His breath stops.

“Urk—”

He drops to his knees, coughing blood. His skin pales, and a pain worse than fire ignites in his bones.

“Bones... bones... burning... *rotting*...”

He falls to his side, spasming, blood bubbling from his lips. The world swirls, blackens. His last thought before darkness takes him: *Should’ve left it alone...*

Time passes.

When Golar awakens, the torch is cold, and pain lingers in every joint. His bones feel wrong—fragile, hot inside. He shudders and sits up, vision swaying.

His mouth is dry. He can’t remember which tunnel he came from. The walls all look the same—rough, ancient, no fresh marks.

He leans on the sarcophagus, breathing hard.

“Where... am I?”

He stumbles forward, dragging his sword, torch in hand. But every path seems unfamiliar, every turn new.

“Great. Got myself cursed and lost in a damn tomb... Could’ve just carved a few pillars like a normal dwarf. No, I had to go pokin’ the bones.”

He turns, pauses.

“...I swear if I see another skeleton I’ll shatter my own knees to play dead.”

The darkness ahead offers no answer, only another corridor and the faint sound of trickling water and something deeper still... a whisper that might not be in his head.

The tunnels grow narrower, the dust thicker, and the air grows so dense Golar can hardly breathe. Every step is a drag through the weight of darkness, every breath laced with grit and mold. His lungs rattle with each cough, and blood flecks stain his sleeve. His legs threaten to give, the Bone Rot gnawing inside him like termites boring through marrow.

Gritting his teeth, he fumbles at his belt pouch and pulls free a healing potion—thick, bitter, red as iron. He uncorks it, gulps it down, and shudders as warmth rushes into his gut. The

burning behind his eyes fades slightly, and the ache in his ribs dulls to something he can ignore.

“Still breathin’... curse ain’t won yet,” he growls hoarsely, torch shaking in his hand.

He pushes forward.

Around a bend, the tunnel opens into a larger chamber. Cold and silent. The ceiling arches high above, hidden in gloom, and the room is choked with thick cobwebs that hang like tattered shrouds. Golar pushes them aside with the blade of his sword, coughing again as dry strands stick to his beard.

Wet. Sloshing. A dragging thud comes.

From the far side of the chamber, a mass moves.

It shambles into view—an abomination of tangled limbs, half-dissolved faces, twisted torsos and flailing arms stitched by rot and unnatural sinew. It moves faster than something so large should, its feet slapping wetly on the stone floor, mouth-holes moaning without lungs.

“Stone help me,” Golar mutters. “What pit vomited *you* up?”

The Thrall charges with shocking speed, a mass of human and elven legs pumping in grotesque unison. Golar throws himself aside just in time to avoid the first slamming fist that crushes stone where he stood. He rolls to his feet, swinging wide—his sword sinks into its side, but barely slows it.

The Thrall shrieks, arms flailing. Two massive limbs crash into Golar’s chest, hurling him backward. He slams into the far wall with a thud, gasping for breath.

It lunges again.

Golar rises, blood dripping from his nose, and counters—he hacks down with all his strength, severing part of the twisted shoulder. Black rot sprays into the air, but the Thrall grabs him, its grotesque mass of fingers clenching his torso, dragging him toward a gaping mouth formed of stitched jaws and broken ribs.

“No you don’t!”

With a final snarl, Golar jams his sword into its center—deep, to the hilt—and yanks free a twisted organ of some kind. The creature lets out a wailing, bubbling moan. It shudders... then detonates.

The Thrall bursts in a foul explosion—flesh, bone shards, and black necrotic energy blasting outward in a ten-foot ring. Golar is thrown across the room, slammed against the wall, and buried in webs and old bones.

The world spins. His ears ring. His chest feels caved in. He blinks dust and rot from his eyes and slowly pulls himself to his feet.

He stinks of mold, bile, and death. Cobwebs cling to his arms, and blackened fluid seeps from his clothes. His torch sputters low in the corner, half-extinguished.

“By the Forge... I need a bath in boiling ale after this.”

He stumbles out of the chamber, dragging his battered shield behind him, limping into the next tunnel without looking back.

The darkness ahead promises more of the same—rot, secrets, things better left buried. But he’s too deep to stop now.

“Forward, then,” he mutters. “Can’t go up till I find the road back up.”

And with one last cough, he vanishes into the tunnel’s black throat, each step echoing like a final drumbeat.

Golar’s steps drag now, each one heavier than the last. His breath comes in rattles, thick with blood and exhaustion. He fumbles again at his belt and finds the last flask—his final healing potion. He uncorks it, downs it in three gulps, and throws the bottle with a roar.

The glass shatters against the stone wall with a sharp *crack*, fragments scattering.

“Last one,” he growls, wiping his mouth. “That was for the troll, the skeletons, the bones, the damned choir, and... whatever else crawls next.”

He stumbles onward, following the flicker of his dying torchlight. Soon, he enters a new chamber.

It’s quiet. Ancient. Reverent in a way that makes his skin crawl.

Old iron candle holders stand crooked and rust-stained, each one still clinging to the stumps of long-dead candles. Cobwebs coat everything in thick grey gauze. At the center of the room is a stone altar, black with time, and behind it, carved into the wall in faded detail, is a figure.

A human body, muscular and robed... with the head of a goat. Horns spiraling like augers into the ceiling. Its arms outstretched, hands open.

Golar’s heart slows.

He knows that image. He *owns* it.

“I have this... in my wall niche...” he mutters, stepping forward. “Cursed beast of the Nine Hells... so this I’ve been worshipping all along?”

A sickly smile curls his lips, bitter and hollow.

“Well then. You sure know how to ruin a man’s theology.”

Before he can laugh, another presence answers from the adjoining chamber.

A figure in black vestments steps through the arched doorway, robes tattered and soaked in decay. Its face is withered, skin clinging like old leather to high cheekbones, eyes black and burning with pale fire.

Its voice is low, cracked like a tomb door opening. “Pilgrim of dust... drinker of old lies. You’ve come far, only to bleed for the truth.”

Golar raises his sword and snarls. “I’ve bled enough for a thousand truths.”

The Apostle raises one skeletal hand, and shadows coil around its fingers.

“Let’s see how your body *withstands* truth.”

It casts *Blight*. Black rot shoots through the air like grasping fingers. Golar barely raises his shield in time—he’s thrown back, coughing blood, vision swimming.

He charges, slicing his blade across the Apostle’s robes. Sparks of unholy light flare from the cut, but the creature weaves away, lips moving in silent prayer. Dark figures appear, swirling around it—*Spirit Guardians*, ghostly visages of cultists long dead. They tear at Golar’s arms and face as he fights through them.

“Back! *Back to the pit that bore you!*”

He swings again, connects—deep in the side. The Apostle shrieks and grabs him by the throat. Necrotic energy pours through Golar’s chest, and he drops to one knee, gasping.

“You are not worthy of stone,” the Apostle hisses. “Let the tomb have you.”

It raises its arms, casting a black circle that opens beneath Golar—he begins to vanish, pulled into a vision of sealed crypts, walls without end.

But with one last surge, he hurls his dagger upward—straight into the Apostle’s face.

It cries out in rage, the spell snapping.

Golar lunges, slamming his sword into its chest, burying it deep.

The Grave Apostle gasps once, then collapses into dust.

Silence.

Utter silence.

Golar falls back, panting, burned, bleeding. His head swims.

He crawls from the room—his torch is gone, his body screaming. The tunnels stretch out endlessly. He stumbles through corridor after corridor for hours. Time means nothing.

At one turn, the floor gives way. He falls into a pit of muddy water, the cold shocking him awake. He gasps and gulps it down, coughing violently.

Soaked and freezing, he pulls himself out and limps on.

Further ahead, an old iron spike trap triggers—he stumbles back just in time, spikes slamming from both walls and floor. He curses, breathless.

“Not today. Not like *that*.”

He keeps walking.

Then finally—*finally*—he sees it.

A half-open stone door, cracked just enough.

The door.

The one he first found, the one he entered hours—maybe days—ago.

Golar falls to his knees.

He almost weeps.

Stone. Sweet, familiar stone. The scent of old torches and dry air from above.

“I’m home,” he breathes, voice cracking. “Not dead. Not yet.”

He grips the wall and hauls himself upright.

One step at a time.

He rises from the tombs, the curse still in him, the wounds fresh, but the fight not over yet.

The stone door groans as Golar forces it open and steps into the cold hallway above. The air feels thinner, cleaner—less choked with rot and forgotten whispers. He leans against the wall for a moment, then limps to the torch sconce, lights it, and trudges up the long stair. Each step drags like iron, every joint howling. The Bone Rot still gnaws in his chest and spine, an invisible fire slowly eating him from within.

He emerges back into the temple's lower hall, breath ragged, sweat pooling in the corners of his eyes.

Without a word, he shuffles to the tool rack where his spare cloth sack waits, stained with soot and lime. He unbuckles each piece of armor slowly, one by one, wincing with every motion—helmet, mail shirt, gloves, bracers, boots. They go into the sack with dull thuds. He ties the drawstrings shut and lifts it over his shoulder with a grunt.

No one stops him. The temple is still, silent save for the creak of high beams and the faint whisper of wind through the mortar-cracked stone.

He leaves.

That night he returns home under torchlight, driving his mule cart with one hand and bracing the other against his ribs. Knuckle is quiet for once, as if sensing the weight of something lingering. When they reach the stall, Golar feeds the mule, brushes its flanks, and mutters, “You didn’t go down there, but you still came out better than I did.”

Then he trudges inside, drops his sack by the door, and collapses onto the boar hide rug without even removing his boots. The floor is hard, but familiar. Warmed by memory if not flame.

He sleeps like the dead.

The next day, he wakes groaning, throat dry, limbs shaking. But duty remains, like the beat of a drum only he can hear. He straps on his work clothes and returns to the temple.

The final pillar awaits him in the main nave, scaffold already set. As he moves to finish the last sigils, he notices something strange. In the base of the first pillar he worked on—nearly invisible in the recess—are markings. Fine lines etched in spirals and nested squares. Not part of the holy iconography. He runs his fingers over them.

“Not holy... not dwarven... not recent.”

He steps back. The lines aren’t random. There’s a pattern. Another set of symbols—small crosses within circles—hide beneath the capital stone. On the wall near the altar, more: a sequence of inverted torches and flame glyphs arranged in angles.

His eyes narrow.

“Coordinates?” he mutters. “A message? A map?”

They seem like something from an older script, something encoded. A way of hiding meaning in design. The patterns, when followed from pillar to wall to altar, almost point back... downward.

Back to the tombs.

“I’m not diggin’ further,” he whispers. “But someone wanted that place remembered. Or sealed.”

He finishes the carving, tracing the last of the sacred symbols with the same hands that carved death and ruin days before. He brushes the dust from the stone, wipes his brow, and limps to the overseer.

A robed member of the Order hands him a heavy purse, voice calm.

“You have completed your work well, mason. The temple breathes again.”

Golar nods, too tired to respond properly. The pouch is solid in his hand—300 gold, 20 silver. Blood-earned.

He returns home in silence. The sun is low when he arrives. He unhitches Knuckle with the last of his strength, drops the coin pouch onto his kitchen table, and stares at it.

It gleams. He does not.

He shuffles to bed, drops his clothes like old skin, and collapses under the thick wool blanket.

His body shakes.

His skin burns cold.

His breath rattles.

The Bone Rot stirs deeper now.

“I brought it up with me,” he whispers. “Didn’t leave it in the grave.”

He stares at the ceiling until the edges of his vision darken and sleep drags him down into dreams riddled with rot, whispers, and the face of the goat-headed god that once sat quietly in his wall.

Golar wakes in the dead of night, his skin slick with cold sweat, the blanket twisted around his limbs like a snare. His throat feels like cracked stone, dry and searing. He groans and rolls off the bed, crawling toward the corner of the room where the water bucket sits.

With a trembling hand, he drags the bucket closer, plunges his face into the lukewarm water, and drinks greedily as he gasps for air. The water spills down his beard and soaks his shirt, but he doesn't care—he drinks until his lungs burn and his gut aches.

Then, strengthless, he collapses onto the kitchen floor, chest heaving. He lays there for hours, watching the ceiling swirl above him, breath shallow, bones aching as if the marrow is being chewed from within.

By dawn, he forces himself upright, clutching a wooden post to steady his legs. “No more waiting,” he mutters. “Either I die or I fix this.”

He stumbles through the stone city’s lower levels, past quiet homes with shuttered vents, down stairwells worn smooth by generations. The corridors are cool and dim, the lanterns barely flickering. He passes a few dwarves with carts or baskets who give him a wary glance, seeing the sickness etched in his face.

Finally, he reaches the familiar low archway, iron-framed and hung with bunches of drying herbs. The scent of root, ash, and old blood clings to the doorway.

He enters.

Mistress Bruna stands at her stone table, sleeves rolled, filling small glass vials from a steaming iron cauldron. The room is hazy with smoke from smoldering bundles of pungent green stalks hanging over hot coals.

She looks up as he enters, eyes narrowing. “You’re paler than boiled bone.”

Golar leans against the doorframe, voice ragged. “My bones... they’re rottin’ from the inside. Somethin’ cursed me. Down in the tombs beneath the Flaming Torch.”

Bruna sets the vials aside and crosses the room, inspecting him with a healer’s precision. She touches his forehead, sniffs the air near his mouth, presses a hand to his chest.

“I’ve seen this before,” she mutters. “Bone Rot. It’s old. Dark. It rides the marrow, feeds on the soul’s warmth. Herbs won’t cut it.”

“Then cut deeper,” Golar growls. “Whatever it takes.”

She studies him for a moment, nods slowly.

“It will take blood. Ritual blood. The dark kind. I’ll need 150 gold.”

He doesn’t hesitate. “Done. Just fix me.”

She motions to a mat of straw and cloth near the fire. “Lie down. Try not to move.”

Golar removes his cloak and gear, lowering himself onto the mat with a hiss of pain. Bruna begins chanting in a slow, guttural tongue—one older than dwarvish, older than the halls of Felhedrin. The herbs over the coals smoke thicker now, the air swirling with bitter, acrid vapor.

He watches as her shadow flickers on the wall, growing strange, twisted by the candlelight.

Then she returns—with a dog. A lean mutt with shaggy brown fur and weary eyes.

Golar clenches his teeth.

Bruna holds a curved iron knife and whispers something to the beast. Then, with one fluid motion, she slits its throat. Blood sprays across Golar’s bare chest, hot and shocking. The dog yelps—a high, painful sound—then falls limp.

The blood pools, dark and steaming, soaking into the straw. Golar’s head swims.

Bruna, face expressionless, saws the dog’s head off, places it in a wide obsidian bowl, and begins mixing herbs into the open skull. She grinds roots, adds coals, pours a vial of black oil, and chants again.

Finally, she drinks from the skull.

The room pulses.

Golar gasps, eyes rolling back. A hot wave of agony explodes through his chest, down his limbs. He screams, then blacks out.

When he wakes, the room is dim again, the coals cold, the smoke thin. He lies on the mat, breathing shallow but steady. The pain is still there—but different. Distant. Weakened.

He turns his head. Bruna is asleep on her stool, arms folded, head bowed.

He lays still for hours, gathering what strength remains. Then he rises slowly, every muscle protesting. He puts his shirt back on, reaches for his boots.

Before leaving, he stands in the doorway and says quietly, “Thank you.”

Bruna doesn’t look up. “Rest.”

Golar nods once and walks out into the stone corridor, the smell of blood and herbs still clinging to him.

At home, he strips down, climbs into bed, and lets himself fall into a black, dreamless sleep.

Weeks pass in slow, steady rhythm. Golar’s strength returns, bone by bone. The rot in his marrow recedes, the fever ebbs. Each day he wakes with less pain in his joints, more steadiness in his breath.

He spends the time sharpening his tools, oiling his armor, writing in his stonecraft tome. He doesn’t speak of the tomb or Bruna’s ritual. Some things stay buried deeper than bones.

Then one morning, a knock sounds at his door.

He opens it to find a courier in city livery holding a sealed scroll.

“Work request, Master Golar,” the young man says. “From the Office of Antiquities.”

Golar takes the scroll, breaks the wax, and reads.

To Golar, Master Mason of Felhedrin,

You are requested to oversee restoration work at the partially collapsed royal storage vault located on the eastern edge of the city, adjacent to the ruins of Old Marrowgate. The site dates to the early Tharnic Age and is believed to contain significant historical infrastructure beneath its surviving foundations. Compensation will be rendered in full upon structural completion and report.

He grunts. “Tharnic work. That’s old stone.”

By midday he’s packed his tools, fastened them to his cart, and climbed aboard beside Knuckle, who snorts at the harness like it’s insulted his lineage. Golar pats his flank.

“Back to it, friend. No undead this time, I hope.”

The cart rattles through Felhedrin’s eastern edge, past merchant homes and tanneries, into the broken outskirts where the ground shifts and tilts around buried bones of the city’s past. There, beside a scaffolding of fresh-cut timber and an array of tents bearing the Royal College sigil, sits the ruin—half-sunk, its marble ribs broken and moss-covered.

Scholars in long coats and spectacles flit between documents and wall facings, arguing over inscriptions and stratigraphy. A few glance up as Golar arrives. One nods curtly.

“You’re the mason?”

“Aye,” Golar replies. “And you’re the ones who keep walking over cracked stone wondering why it doesn’t hold.”

They don’t laugh, but they don’t stop him either.

He’s led to a narrow stair—recently cleared—descending into a vault room lined with partially collapsed walls. Crates still sit in the corners, rotted into splinters. The ceiling ribs have fractured and shifted. Golar kneels by the eastern wall where layers of stone face each other like pages in an ancient book.

He brushes aside a fall of dust and begins working.

His chisel carves gently. The wall gives slowly, carefully. As he peels away the outer stone—cut from rougher granite—a smoother slab reveals itself beneath, sealed in ancient mortar. On it is a mark.

A spiral. Then another. Then a third.

All of them entwined, bound together within a single carved eye—a goat’s eye.

He freezes.

His hand lingers near the spiral.

He knows this. Not from life... but from memory. From a faded sketch once folded in the back of his great-grandfather’s leather notebook, a book full of stone measurements and masons’ wisdom. The sketch had been half-finished, the ink faded, and the old dwarf’s scrawl beside it read only: *“Beware the Eye. It sees from under the stone.”*

It had been dismissed. A superstition, some old hill-clan omen.

But here it is.

Right before him.

He glances back.

The scholars are busy at their own wall, none paying him mind.

Slowly, he pulls a sheet of parchment from his satchel, lays it flat, and presses charcoal over the carving. The rubbing comes through clean, the spiral and eye precise.

He rolls it tightly and slides it into a leather tube, securing it inside his coat.

He does not speak. He does not write it into the ledger. He replaces the outer granite stone carefully, makes it appear untouched.

Then he mutters under his breath.

“I don’t know what you are... but I’ll not have your secrets in the hands of men who never laid brick.”

He stands, wipes the dust from his gloves, and calls back to the scholars, “Collapse is stable. I’ll reinforce it tomorrow. Vault’ll hold once I anchor the eastern braces.”

The lead scholar barely looks up. “Fine, fine. Just don’t damage any inscriptional strata.”

Golar turns away from them, toward the stairs.

The eye lingers behind his lids.

Watching. Silent. Stonebound.

That evening, Golar returns home under the flickering light of guttering street lanterns, his thoughts as heavy as the stone he worked. The rubbing of the symbol is tucked safely in the inner fold of his coat, but it might as well be burning through the fabric. The eye and spiral twist in his mind with every step, silent and unblinking.

He enters his home without lighting the hearth. Instead, he moves straight to the library.

The shelves are heavy with stone-bound tomes, scrolls wrapped in rawhide, and thick ledgers from five generations of masons. He moves with purpose, tracing his finger along the dusty spines until he finds it—“*Journal of Gamin Stonearm, Third Mason of the Line.*” His grandfather’s book.

He places it gently on the table and opens it.

The scent of aged paper and coal ink fills the air as he turns page after page—diagrams, ledger entries, block weights, foundation markings. Then, near the back, a folded sheet slips free and lands on the desk.

Golar unfolds it.

There it is again.

The triple spiral inside the goat’s eye. Drawn in careful, almost reverent hand. Below it, written in old dwarvish:

“*Mark of the Silent Heir. Follow the stone—not the blood.*”

He flips further, scanning scrawled notes written in the margins.

“King Hadrek’s reign... ended without heir. Or so we believed. The court ledger erased a decade—from 3E 917 to 927. During this ‘blank decade,’ select masons were assigned to secret projects beneath the King’s Halls.”

Another page—scratched in near-illegible haste—lists carvings Golar has seen before.

A hex rune inverted beneath the Grand Pillar of Ironmeet.

A spiral set behind the brace arch of the southmost aqueduct of Arganhall.

An angled rune etched into the foundation stone beneath the Hall of Guilds, Felhedrin.

He leans back, breath slow.

“All these years... walking over it. Fixing it. Not seein’ what it meant.”

He opens an old ledger of kings—a dusty, brittle tome. He scans the names:

King Bramdur the Uniter: 3E 851 – 873

King Uldrek Forgebrow: 3E 873 – 894

King Hadrek Stonebind: 3E 894 – 917

And then... nothing.

The next king, King Dornir the Quiet, does not appear until 3E 927.

Ten missing years.

Instead, at the page where Hadrek’s line ends, a faint, almost invisible spiral has been pressed into the margin.

No name.

No decree.

Just the mark.

Golar runs a calloused thumb over the indent, and mutters, “A prince among the stoneworkers. A bastard heir buried like a foundation stone.”

He closes the book, but the pieces swirl now. A pattern he never saw. Runes he’d assumed were decorative now felt deliberate. Orientation, placement, even chisel marks—like messages meant only for those who could *read the stone*.

His blood thumps heavy in his ears.

“Grandfather knew,” he whispers. “And now I know.”

Outside, the wind moans low through the city’s stone ducts. Inside, the library glows dim in the flicker of a lone candle.

A silent heir. A hidden truth. And a trail written not in ink, but in granite.

The morning sun breaks dimly through Felhedrin's upper vents, casting long beams of gold into the ruin's scaffolded courtyard. Golar stands once more at the site of the old Tharnic vault, his breath misting in the cool morning air. The stone beneath his feet, still unsettled, feels heavier now—not with weight, but meaning.

The Royal College scholars are already there. Archivist Vethra, sharp-eyed and draped in blue-trimmed robes, approaches as he dismounts from his cart. Her face is lined with academic rigor and a permanent suspicion.

"Master Golar," she says coolly, "we received word that you uncovered an inscription during your excavation. Any symbol or etching we might document?"

He doesn't look at her right away. He walks to the vault stair, lays out his tools with careful deliberation. "A few weathered runes. Decorative script," he says flatly. "Nothing sacred. Nothing legible."

Vethra narrows her eyes. "All stone has meaning, Master Mason. Even the worn pieces."

He shrugs. "Then you'll have to make do with worn meaning."

She huffs and turns, muttering to her assistants. Golar continues his work in silence, heart heavy with the lie. The rubbing in his coat feels like a stone weight pressing against his ribs.

By evening, he returns home.

The fire's already lit when the knock comes at the door. He opens it and finds Gala standing there with a basket in her arms and a smile not quite hidden behind windblown curls.

"Smelled like you've forgotten how to feed yourself again."

He smirks, stepping aside. "If I'm cursed with anything, it's that."

Inside, the hearthlight flickers on stone and scroll. Gala places the basket down—thick brown bread wrapped in cloth, and a steaming pot of root-vegetable stew that fills the room with warmth.

They sit. They eat. Slowly, in the silence between spoonfuls, Golar reaches for his grandfather's ledger and the parchment with the rubbing. He hesitates, then slides them across the table.

"I didn't tell the archivists," he says quietly. "Didn't trust 'em with this. I found it behind a stone wall in the vault—this symbol. And I've seen it before. In the book. Grandfather called it the 'Silent Heir.'"

Gala leans in, eyes tracing the spiral within the goat's eye. Her brow furrows.

"I've seen this," she murmurs. "Not this exactly, but close."

“Where?”

“In the College. The oldest stairwell—worn fresco behind the archives wing. Everyone thinks it’s a faded clan crest. Triple spiral. I pass it every week.” She bites her lip, then pulls a bit of charcoal and scrap parchment from her satchel and begins sketching, hand practiced and precise.

When she finishes, she lays it beside Golar’s rubbing.

The resemblance is uncanny—same curves, same central spiral, though the college’s version is embedded in an abstract sunburst.

“It was never a clan mark,” Golar mutters. “It was *his* mark. The prince. The one who vanished. Someone kept it there, hidden in plain sight.”

Gala leans back, arms crossed, a worried look in her eyes. “What does it mean?”

He stares into the fire for a long while, the stew cooling in his bowl.

“It means the stone remembers what the crowns forget. And someone left a trail, hoping one of us might listen.”

Three nights pass. Rain slicks the stone streets of Felhedrin, and thunder moans softly beyond the upper gates. Golar sits hunched over his worktable, etching slow lines into a block of soft clay—test sketches of joints and spiral locks he remembered from the early vault structures. His brow is furrowed, mind weighed by the mark, the blank decade, the truth only stone dares whisper.

Then, just past midnight, a soft knock taps at the door.

He opens it to find Gala, soaked through her hooded cloak, clutching a tightly wrapped bundle against her chest. Her eyes flicker with tension, her voice low.

“I got it,” she says. “Don’t ask how.”

Inside, she unrolls the oilskin bundle to reveal three parchment fragments—each bearing careful copies of geometric diagrams and annotations written in the old Royal Lexicon. One page shows a ring of interconnected buildings from different quarters of the city: the old Treasury Hall, the Grand Forge Temple, the southern cisterns, and the Guild Hall of Masons. They’re arranged not randomly, but with precise spacing and angles, all forming a larger spiral motif embedded in a twelve-point grid.

At the top is a title written in royal ink.

“Fragment of the Codex Peral – Geometry of Sacred Foundation, Revision IV.”

Golar frowns as he traces a line from the Grand Forge to the Guild Hall. “Looks religious,” he mutters.

“It’s not,” Gala says. “I thought the same. But look.”

She points to a margin note, nearly erased: “*Foundation alignment complete. Seal preserved beneath original cornerstone. Keep workers illiterate. Move the symbol three degrees inward. No crest.*”

“It’s not worship,” Golar murmurs. “It’s a *cipher*. A structural map.”

He sets his mug down with a heavy thunk.

“These places—every one built during Hadrek’s reign or shortly after. And look here—this seal here? The masons didn’t just build around it. They *hid* it.”

“And tied it to blood,” Gala adds. “Foundational bloodline seals. That’s what they called them. I couldn’t copy all the texts, but some notes said only one living descendant per generation would be ‘tied to the core.’ Hidden. Watched. Guarded.”

Golar leans back in his chair, the firelight casting deep shadows on the stone walls.

“So the heir lived. Had children. And the crown buried them with stones and mortar, made sure they stayed among the lowest castes—never seen, never traced. A bloodline living under the floorboards.”

He runs a hand through his beard, mind spinning.

“I’ve met some of them, haven’t I? Maybe I *am* one. Or knew one. And none of us ever knew.”

He stares at the Codex fragment for a long time, then speaks low and slow.

“The crowns built their halls on the backs of our kin. But someone among ‘em... left the trail for us. Not in ink. Not in stories. In *structure*. In the way walls are laid. In how beams align. The stone is the story.”

Gala nods, quiet now. The rain still drums outside, but inside the torch burns steady.

A mystery buried not in vaults, but in the very skeleton of the city.

The night is quiet in the lower stone city, quiet in a way that puts Golar’s nerves on edge. His workshop glows with warm amber light, the forge low but steady, casting dancing shadows against the chisel-lined walls. He is seated at his drafting table, etching another copy of the Codex fragment into a slab of polished slate. The spiral geometry is beginning to make more sense now—anchor points, alignments, buried truths in the bones of Felhedrin.

Then he hears it.

Three deliberate knocks.

Not the knock of a friend, or a courier, or Gala.

He opens the door with a hand resting on the hilt of the old hammer he keeps just out of sight.

The man who stands there is tall for a surface-dweller, clean-shaven, dressed in rust-colored robes embroidered with flame motifs. A pendant hangs from his neck—a silver tongue engulfed in fire: the mark of the Order of Fire Eaters.

His eyes are calm. Too calm.

“Master Golar,” he says with a smile that doesn’t touch his eyes. “May I come in?”



Golar narrows his gaze. “Depends. You bring work or trouble?”

“Only a conversation.”

Golar steps aside, unwillingly intrigued.

Inside, the robed man walks the room as if measuring it. His fingers briefly graze the edge of Golar’s latest diagram, but he doesn’t linger.

“The city’s old,” the man begins. “Its spine built not from stone, but *belief*. Belief in lineage. In bloodlines that rule by ancient right.”

Golar doesn’t reply.

The man continues. “There are truths—truths that can unravel that spine. You dig in deep places, mason. And some things down there... they were buried *for* a reason.”

He stops, finally meeting Golar’s eyes. “You’ve found something. A pattern. A bloodline. We know.”

“Do you.” Golar’s voice is flat as worked slate.

“The Fire Eaters are not your enemies,” the man says calmly. “We serve a purpose. To prevent instability. We’ve tolerated your work because stone settles on its own. But you are veering toward... *uneathing*. And that could collapse more than just old halls.”

Golar stands slowly, wiping his hands on a cloth. “I build things to last,” he says. “Every cut I make is so something else *stands*. I’m not tearing this city down just to see what’s underneath.”

The man’s smile widens—almost genuine, but not quite. “Let’s hope you remember that.”

He turns, cloak rustling, and moves to the door. But before stepping out, he looks back.

“You’re respected, Master Mason. You’ve built more of Felhedrin than half its lords have. But know this—reveal the wrong truth, and you won’t just lose your reputation. You’ll *pull down the spine of the city*... and all of us with it.”

Then he’s gone.

The door closes with a heavy click.

Golar stands still for a long while. Then he walks to the forge and adds another log to the fire. The flames rise.

“I’ve never feared fire,” he mutters. “But I don’t take well to being warned off.”

He glances at the slate again, the spiral gleaming faintly in the flickering light.

“If they’re trying to bury it again, then I’ve just started diggin’ in the right place.”

The workshop is still, save for the low rasp of steel on stone.

Golar sits hunched over a broad slab of granite, his chisels laid out like a soldier’s weapons. The hearthstone is almost finished—smooth-faced, perfectly balanced, destined to lie beneath his own fire for as long as the dwelling stands. He’s carved hundreds of hearthstones in his life. But this one is different.

His hand trembles just slightly as he takes the smallest chisel and begins the final mark—on the underside, where no flame will ever touch, and no casual eye will ever see.

A spiral.

Then a second.

Then the third, coiling inward, all joined in the shape of an eye.

The goat’s eye.

He breathes out slow, then carves a ring around it, smooth and clean. He runs a thumb over it when it's done, and says nothing for a long time.

"If I speak," he mutters to himself, "I unmake what holds this city upright. Not just crowns and robes... but bonds. Stone between stone. If I don't..."

He trails off.

"Then it dies with me. The truth. Like the tombs and the names in the walls no one remembers."

He flips the stone carefully, lifts it with the help of a small pulley, and settles it into place in the hearth's foundation. He tests it twice—solid. It won't move again.

Not in his lifetime.

As he stokes the fire, a knock comes, gentler this time. He opens the door to find Gala with a stack of parchment tucked under one arm and a smile that fades the moment she sees his face.

"I brought something."

Inside, she hands him a freshly copied translation—smoother Dwarvish script, drawn from a recently uncovered ledger at the College. It confirms patterns they both already suspect—family names tied to building crews, reshuffled land grants in the years following King Hadrek's death, and cryptic phrases like *"bound to stone, not throne."*

She places the parchment down beside the embers and sits.

Golar remains quiet.

Finally, she says, softly, "Sometimes silence is protection, not betrayal."

He nods, not looking at her. "And sometimes silence is the mortar that keeps the weight from cracking everything else."

Neither of them speaks after that.

They sit side by side as the fire grows, the warmth rising from the newly placed hearthstone, the hidden mark beneath it sealed in its place. A secret etched not in ink, but in granite.

Not erased.

Not revealed.

Simply... remembered.

Weeks pass like slow water over stone.

The ruin at Marrowgate is fully restored, its broken vaults shored up with precision and care. Golar oversees the final sealing of the eastern chamber, each block aligned to old codes and

balance points few masons now understand. The Royal College sends a gilded letter of commendation, praising his “invisible craftsmanship” and “faithfulness to Tharnic proportion.”

He doesn’t read it twice.

The Fire Eaters do not return.

But from time to time—on the edge of scaffoldings, in the corner of a crowd at market, from a shadow half-buried in torchlight—he feels them. Watching. Measuring. Waiting for something that may never come.

He says nothing.

Instead, he prepares.

One evening, beneath the echoing dome of the Guild Archive, Golar descends to the stone records vault. The walls here are thick with dust. He hands a sealed scroll tube to the record-keeper—documents inside include the rubbing of the goat’s eye spiral, notes from his grandfather’s ledger, and a copy of Gala’s translation.

“No name,” he says. “Seal it under number only. No family, no signature.”

The dwarf clerk raises a brow but nods. “Very well, Master Golar. Code tag?”

He thinks for a moment.

“Stoneborn.”

The clerk nods again. The tube is logged, stamped, and taken below, into the vault where only stone remembers.

Back at his workshop, Golar returns to the rhythm that’s always guided him.

He begins carving.

Not a commission, not a public work—just a statue. A figure without name, without crest or robe. It stands with arms folded, cloak drawn close. The face is stoic, quiet, carved in clean lines.

But the eyes—those he shapes with care. Coiled spirals within spirals, horns curling backward into silent thought.

The goat’s eye.

He sets his tools down as the fire burns low, breath misting against cold stone.

His hand lingers on the statue’s shoulder.

“Stone doesn’t forget,” he murmurs, voice barely louder than the flame’s crackle. “And neither will I.”

The morning after a long draft of silence and secrets, Golar wakes with a thirst no ale can answer. His bones ache not with pain, but with a restlessness he cannot name.

He mutters, “Time for something that bites harder.”

He pulls on his boots, straps on his belt, and marches off toward the low corner of the stone city where the scent of herbs and burned root always hangs in the air. Bruna’s place. The healer doesn’t even glance up as he enters.

“You’ve got that look,” she says, stirring something thick in her cauldron.

“I need a brew,” Golar says. “Not for healing. For forgetting. The kind that sings fire into your skull.”

Bruna eyes him, then nods slowly. “Dark Moon, then.”

She scribbles a few notes onto a piece of old bark parchment. “Here. But mind you—don’t drink it with a weak heart. Or a weak head.”

He grins. “I’ve got neither.”

With Knuckle hitched to the cart, Golar sets off to the open market above. The air is sharp and dry, filled with shouts of vendors and the chatter of buyers haggling over root spice and copper wire.

He stops at a grain stall and inspects bags of malt and barley. “This the strong kind?” he asks the halfling vendor.

“Strong enough to stun a goat,” she replies.

He buys the lot, then adds bundles of fireberries, dry ashroot, two fists of razorleaf, and a jug of cracked lichen oil for distilling. At the edge of the market, he finds a cooper unloading barrels.

“How big’s that one?” he asks, pointing.

“Forty liters.”

“I’ll take three of it.”

By noon, his cart is groaning under the weight. He unloads it all at the stall, hauls it home piece by piece, and clears space in his workroom.

The next days pass in sour scent and steam. He sets up his copper still, grinds the malt, mixes the mash, adds berries, then begins the slow, careful distillation—cutting the first flow, saving the heart, tossing the tail. The final liquid comes clear, vicious, hot enough to scald the lungs.

He barrels it, seals the top with iron rings, and scrawls a name onto the lid in chalk:

Dark Moon.

Weeks pass. When the barrel finally settles, he taps it.

The first mug is a hammer to the jaw. He drinks it in one go and nearly loses his footing, staggering back into the wall with a wheeze.



“Stone gods,” he gasps. “That’ll kill or cure.”

Satisfied, he lights his pipe, smoke rising like mist from a dwarven forge.

A few days later, Gard and Umer show up, knocking like a pair of goblins trying to break through granite.

“Golar!” Gard yells. “Heard you brewed something unholy!”

Umer sniffs the air and grins. “Smells like coal mixed with vengeance.”

They sit around the hearth, mugs full. First round’s cautious. Second is reckless. Third is foolish.

By the fourth, they’re slurring into tales of collapsed tunnels, crooked stones, and women who once kicked them out of their own beds.

Gard raises his mug, eyes unfocused. “This ain’t drink... it’s a *ritual*.”

Umer groans, halfway under the table. “I can’t feel my spine.”

By the time they crawl home like bruised rats, Golar’s left chuckling alone. He stands, sways, then claps his hands.

“Now for stew.”

He tosses lamb chunks into the pot, rough-cuts onions, roots, and a few stale pieces of bread. The whole mess boils down into a hearty sludge, thick and fragrant. He eats straight from the pot, growling with satisfaction.

Then, he gets to work.

He fills small glass vials with Dark Moon, packs them into a wooden crate with straw, and scratches a price onto the lid:

1 gp a piece. No refunds.

He takes them to the tavern district. Within an hour, word spreads. A drink that makes your ears ring and your knees forget how to walk.

Fifteen vials, fifteen gold. All gone by the time the moon climbs.

One drunk stumbles out of the tavern hollering, “Who poured lightning in my skull!?”

Golar grins, pocketing the coins. “Name’s Dark Moon. Tell your bones.”

He returns home, crate empty, purse heavier, head buzzing—not from drink, but from knowing some things, at least, are built right.

The morning after the last vial of Dark Moon is sold, Golar sleeps in later than usual. The hammering in his skull is not from the drink—he’s built up too much resistance for that—but from the lingering weight of too much silence and too little distraction.

Then a knock comes, slow and firm. Not the drunken kind. The kind with purpose.

He opens the door to find two men standing there—robes of deep grey and brown, marked with stitched symbols of the Upper Flame, the lesser branch of the city’s sprawling religious order. One, older with a trimmed beard, holds a scroll; the other, younger and thinner, clutches a small leather-bound book.

“Master Golar,” the older one says. “We are sent from the Chapel of the Stars. We’re in need of a new altar stone. Our old one was cracked in the cold shift.”

The younger one steps forward, unrolling a parchment sketch. “We need it carved with an oak tree in the center. Strong roots. High branches. And above it... seven stars, for the blessings. And ornaments, if you can—on the corners.”

Golar squints at the drawing. “You’re asking for delicate work.”

“We were told you don’t miss a cut,” the older one replies.

Golar nods. “Alright. But I’ll need the stone in front of me, not drawn on a napkin.”

“You’ll have it this afternoon.”

By midday, the men return, carting a clean, rectangular slab of pale grey granite on a wooden sled. They place it gently onto his main work table, brushing it free of dust.

“Three days,” the elder says. “We’ll be back before the evening bell on the third.”

Then they leave.

Golar rolls up his sleeves and runs a hand across the stone’s face. Fine grain. No fractures. Good material.

He selects a narrow flat chiseling bit and grips the hammer like he’s greeting an old friend.

He begins.

Each star is a study in patience—seven points in all, spread across the top third of the slab. He carves one, then steps back to check alignment, then carves another, slow as breath. The stone responds well, each tap clean, the dust rising like memory.



“Stars for blessings,” he mutters. “Stone don’t bless, but it remembers.”

By evening, the stars gleam in subtle relief, shadows curling along their edges like halos.

The next day, he marks the base of the tree—centered, with the trunk anchoring into the altar’s depth. It takes all morning to rough it out, and half the night to shape the roots like gnarled hands curling down, the branches stretching upward like a silent prayer.

On the third day, he moves to the corners—spirals, knotwork, ancient leafwork from the Tharnic style. He uses his smallest chisel and the lightest taps, each line curved and looping. It’s slow work, meditative.

He hums as he works. Old miner’s tunes, broken and shapeless. The room smells of stone dust and candlewax. Outside, rain patters faintly against the vents.

As the sun begins to dip, the knock comes again.

The two men step inside and study the slab in reverent silence.

“By the stars...” the younger whispers. “It’s... alive.”

The elder runs his hand gently over the tree, then along the ornaments. “Exactly as requested. And more.”

He removes a leather pouch and counts out the gold. “Fifteen pieces. Honest craft deserves honest coin.”

Golar nods, not bothering to count it. “You’ll want to move it slow. It’s got weight, and grace.”

They lift it with care and disappear into the dusk.

Golar leans on the table, wiping dust from his beard, his joints stiff.

“That’s the kind of work I was made for,” he murmurs. “Cut clean, hold fast, say nothing—but stand forever.”

Mausoleum

The sun is low and red behind the stone sky of Felhedrin when the courier comes again—dusty, quiet, and professional. He doesn’t knock like the priests, nor speak with the stiff air of guild messengers. Just a sealed scroll, pressed into Golar’s calloused hand with the words, “Council commission. Time-marked. Immediate start.”

Golar breaks the wax.

The message is terse, formal:

To Master Mason Golar, by writ of the Felhedrin Council of Stonework and Heritage Preservation.

You are summoned to undertake the reconstruction of a collapsed mausoleum structure, Tharnic origin, eastern funerary quarter, designation unknown. You will work with a designated team of masons and architectural stewards.

Structure integrity low. Symbolic detail to be preserved. Report at dawn.

No signature. No room for refusal.

Golar doesn't hesitate. He packs his tools in silence—chisels, string, hammer, wedges, a worn ledger. He straps on his heavy boots, throws on his cloak, and lights his pipe. The smoke curls slowly in the night air as he nods to no one in particular.

“Back to the bones again.”

By morning, he arrives at the edge of the old funerary quarter. The road here is little more than a broken path choked by brambles and the ghosts of forgotten graves. Moss drapes from leaning stones, and old burial markers sag beneath the weight of root and rain.

Set into the hill beyond a collapsed retaining wall lies the dome—half-swallowed by earth, the once-perfect curvature of its roof cracked and sunken on the southern side. Vines cling to its ribs, and its entryway is choked with rubble. A few other workers are already there—shoveling earth, cataloguing fragments.

But Golar doesn't look at them yet.

He walks straight to the lintel above the doorway—just barely visible beneath a curtain of moss. He brushes it aside.

There, carved in fading precision, is a shape he knows.

A spiral. Nested inside a curved horn. Subtle. Nearly worn away.

He presses his thick fingers to it, the old lines gritty beneath his thumb.

“Firgil of the Forgotten Oath...” he mutters, voice low and bitter. “Damn thing remembers more than the council does.”

A younger mason nearby pauses, glancing over. “What was that?”

“Nothing,” Golar says. “Just talkin’ to the stone.”

He sets down his bag, unwraps his tools, and squats beside the cracked threshold.

He can already feel the story humming through the fractured base. This place isn't just bones and vaults—it's a whisper. Another buried truth half-swallowed by time. Another mark carved into the ribs of the world where no one's supposed to see.

He taps the hammer lightly against a chisel, aligning his first cut.

“Well then,” he mutters, “let's see what they *really* wanted buried.”

Inside the canvas-draped site tent, the air hangs heavy with damp stone dust and the scent of old linen. Golar steps through the flap, wiping his boots as a formality, though the mud clings like stubborn memory. A simple table rests in the center of the tent, maps and scrolls weighed down by iron nails and stacked bricks. Two dwarves already sit behind it.

Elder Rhundrik, wrapped in a robe of grey and bone-trim trim, looks up with a stony expression. His beard is braided in thick cords, each loop stiff with ceremonial pins. Beside him, Elder Velka wears simpler robes—less formal, her beard less adorned, but her eyes are sharp beneath lowered lids.

Rhundrik speaks first, his voice clipped. “Master Golar. You’ve been called to lead the reconstruction, but let’s be clear—this is no ordinary worksite. This structure is meant to *rest*, not speak again.”

Golar steps closer, standing tall but not confrontational. “I’m not here to wake the dead. I’m here to honor the way they were buried. You called a mason, not a conjurer.”

Rhundrik’s frown deepens. “We know your reputation. You work clean, but sometimes you dig deeper than asked. This site bears history we *chose* to let fade. Your commission is to *restore*, not uncover.”

Velka doesn’t speak, but her eyes flick to Golar, reading more than Rhundrik says aloud.

Golar plants both hands on the table, fingers rough with dust. “You bury a name long enough, the stone forgets the sound of it. But it never forgets the weight. Let me do the work right, and the dead will rest stronger than they ever did in silence.”

Rhundrik exhales through his nose. “Fine. But mark this—you *will report all anomalies*. Any inscription, any seal, any marking not listed in the original foundation scrolls—logged. Filed. And ignored until properly reviewed.”

Velka finally speaks, her voice low. “And if something *wants* to be remembered, mason?”

Golar meets her gaze. “Then I’ll carve its name in a whisper. Nothing louder than the crack of chisel on stone.”

Velka nods once, slowly.

Rhundrik, less satisfied, waves a hand. “Take your commission. Get to work. And keep your conscience under the floor tiles.”

Golar turns, scroll in hand, and exits the tent without another word. The tent flap snaps closed behind him.

Outside, wind picks up through the ruins, carrying the scent of rain and moss and something older still.

He mutters, “You can’t silence what the stone remembers.”

The morning is cold and slick with dew as Golar begins the first day of work on the Tholos. The site is quiet—no chanting priests, no swarms of overseers—just the steady sounds of stone and wind, and the groan of ropes being hauled taut as scaffolding is raised. The other masons, young and dutiful, defer to Golar without question. They know his reputation. They know when to let a master work.

He starts at the dome's base, where moss and dirt have wormed their way between the old blocks. The outermost stones are worn and split—he removes them carefully, cutting new granite wedges by hand to reset the foundation. His tools move with rhythm, smooth and practiced, each tap purposeful, each pause deliberate. He murmurs to the stone as he works, not words but intention—small sounds that carry respect into the grain.

As the lower courses are pulled apart and mapped, the pattern emerges—clearer now than it ever was in the books. The Tharnic design: twelve concentric rings, each denser in composition than the last. The outer rings were rough quarried stone, the inner ones tightly compacted basalt, polished and friction-set.

“Not just for strength,” Golar mutters. “Weight pulls inward. Focuses. Like a vault... or a ritual circle.”

He sketches the pattern into his ledger as he goes, noting not just the alignment but the weight differences. This wasn't mere burial architecture. It was intention carved into mass. The kind of design made to *hold* something.

By the second day, he begins clearing the central ring. The dome overhead has shifted, so the inner space is partially collapsed. As he clears a mound of broken debris from what once may have been the inner sanctum's threshold, something catches his eye beneath the dust and root tangles.

A fragment. Palm-sized. Cool to the touch even in the midmorning sun.

He brushes it off slowly.

There it is again.

The spiral-goat-eye.

Not carved boldly. No. It's faint, subtle, like someone etched it not as decoration but as a mark left behind for only certain eyes to find.

Golar doesn't speak. He glances around—the others are busy with scaffolding uprights and mortar prep.

He wraps the fragment in a cloth and tucks it inside the breast of his coat, above the heart.

He does not write it in the logbook.

Instead, he sets a new stone wedge where the fragment was found, tilts it just slightly so its weight holds firm, and then moves on.

“Stone talks quiet,” he murmurs. “But it never lies.”

It’s just past midday when Golar sets his chisel along the seam of an uneven floor slab, just off the central ring. The dome’s light slants low through the scaffold’s canvas—enough to catch the dusty pattern of footworn stone. He’s been carefully realigning the inner floor, shifting weight away from the collapsed southern edge. Nothing in the official maps marks this slab as unusual.

But when his hammer taps the stone’s edge, it doesn’t answer with the dull thud of earth-packed base.

It rings. Hollow.

Golar freezes.

He shifts his weight, listening. Another tap. Hollow, again.

He waves off the younger mason nearby. “Get the supports set around the western arch. I’ll finish here.”

Once alone, he kneels, works a pry-wedge along the slab edge, and slowly lifts. Beneath it, darkness breathes up from a shaft no wider than a man’s shoulders, steep with dry air and the faintest smell of old lime and dustless bone.

He lowers a small lantern, its glow catching stone steps—angled and steep, descending into a narrow ossuary chamber. He secures a rope and drops down.

The chamber is cold and silent.

Along the walls are stacked niches—bone rests, orderly and austere. Each set of remains placed with care, wrapped in fragments of once-dark cloth, long faded to grey. But what captures Golar’s breath are the stones above each niche—each marked not with names, but with carved runes only a master mason would understand.

These aren’t family markers. They’re *oaths*.

He kneels by the first.

The rune translates to a cycle date—3E 924—and beneath it: “*Held the seal at Ironmeet.*”

Another reads: “*Built the basin vault. Swore in dark.*”

A third: “*To Hadrek’s blood in silence bound. The line sleeps. The wall stands.*”

Golar’s hand shakes as he brushes away the soot and age from that one. The spiral symbol is there again, smaller, almost hidden in the margin of the carving.

He leans back, breath caught.

“This isn’t a noble’s tomb,” he mutters. “It’s a vault. Not for rank, but for loyalty. These weren’t laid here because they ruled... they were buried here because they *protected* the one who should’ve.”

He stares at the wall of bones, eyes locked on the central seal.

“They died to keep the bloodline buried in stone. Quiet. Hidden.”

He lowers the lantern and bows his head—not from reverence, but from understanding.

They were like him.

Builders. Silent hands. They carved history into walls so kings could pretend it never happened.

He seals the slab behind him when he ascends. No words to the others. Just quiet breath.

Another stone re-set. Another story hidden in the bones of the city.

The central platform gleams beneath the scaffold-filtered light, freshly cleared and restructured. Golar stands before it with arms crossed, the chalk lines of his new design curling across the smoothed stone like threads in a loom. The platform had once held a ceremonial altar—long shattered in the collapse—but now it waits for its heart to return.

He begins drafting with care, each line and measure rooted not just in balance, but in defiance.

He uses the Firgil ratios—a long-forgotten system of sacred geometry buried in mason lore. Not taught. *Remembered*. Ratios derived from lunar and vault arc length, harmonics between weight-bearing stones, used once in the Tharnic Age to embed memory in mass.

Every measurement of the altar matches a line in the Codex Peral. Not openly. Not in ways a scholar would see. But to a trained mason, the base angle, the depth of the recess, the slight curvature of the side supports—*all of it whispers*.

And beneath the central slab, where no torch will shine, he carves the spiral once more—coiled tight, tucked into a recessed stone edge. Not visible. Not recorded.

But part of the structure now.

By late afternoon, it’s finished. Clean, austere, in line with the council’s expectations. A plain-faced altar that no one will question—unless they know how to listen to the stone.

That evening, Elder Rhundrik arrives with a clerk in tow. He studies the platform, says nothing for several breaths.

“Simple. Reserved,” he finally says. “Just as instructed.”

Golar nods, stone-faced. “Weight’s distributed. Geometry’s correct. No embellishment.”

Rhundrik gives the faintest grunt of approval. “Good. The dead don’t need decoration. They need dignity.”

They leave with satisfied steps, never glancing beneath the altar’s weight. Never sensing what pulses behind it.

The sky has dimmed by the time Gala appears, hood drawn low and a sealed scroll clutched in her arms. Her boots are muddy with hurried steps.

She enters the half-lit structure and moves straight to him.

“I found it,” she says, breath short. “In a banned register copied from a partial ledger beneath the Scholar’s Hold. They didn’t call them tombs. They called them *vaults of contested lines*. Firgil geometry, silent seals—each one tied to a bloodline that threatened the balance of the throne.”

She places the scroll in his hands, the seal unbroken.

“This place was never just a resting ground,” she says. “It was proof. Hidden in architecture.”

Golar looks at her, then at the altar.

He nods once.

“Then let this one remember what they won’t.”

They don’t say anything else. The stone is enough.

The dome stands whole again.

Golar climbs the scaffold slowly, the final corbelled stone balanced on his shoulder—heavy, but familiar, like a burden that’s grown into the shape of him. The light filters in golden threads through the narrow vent above, catching motes of dust in their slow, silent drift.

Each stone below this one has been set with precision: inward-leaning, angled just right, forming a vault of memory and silence. The very pattern speaks a language few still know, echoing Firgil principles—structure as message, form as secrecy.

He places the final stone gently into its cradle at the apex.

Then, with the flat of his hammer, he taps it in.

Not with force, but with rhythm.

Three taps. A pause. Two more. A longer pause. Then one.

An old guild sequence. Ritual. Never taught in words, only passed from palm to palm through the hammer.

He steps down.

Below, the masons have cleared away their tools. The scaffolds are being disassembled. The air in the tholos has changed. It breathes differently now.

Elder Velka enters alone, stepping quietly into the finished space. Her eyes lift to the ceiling, then sweep slowly across the reconstructed walls, the altar, the geometry too subtle to name.

She stops beside Golar.

“You’ve given it more than stone,” she says. “You’ve given it breath.”

Golar’s face is marked with soot and sweat, his arms sore to the bone. He watches the light dance against the restored curve of the dome.

“I just listened to what it was already saying,” he replies.

Velka studies him a moment longer, then bows her head. “Then let it speak in peace.”

She leaves without another word.

After the final rites are completed and the last mason departs, Golar remains behind. The tholos is quiet again, the kind of quiet only a place of truth can hold.

He lights a single oil lamp and places it at the center of the altar. Its flame is small, but steady, casting shadows into the seams where the bones rest, where the old oaths sleep.

He kneels, lowering his hand to the stone slab that conceals the ossuary vault beneath.

He whispers, “Rest easy. The line is safe. And the stone remembers.”

The flame flickers. The air holds.

Then he stands and walks out into the dusk.

Crypt

The commission comes wrapped in fine parchment, the seal a lesser noble house—House Mardhal, known more for its fading pride than its political weight. The message is simple, formal: *“Restoration required at ancestral crypt, Northern reach of the mountains. Stones have split from frost. Internal collapse suspected. Payment fair, urgency high.”*

Golar doesn’t waste time. He packs with quiet precision: his best chisels, rope, pry-bars, wedges. A few bundles of smoked meat and dried cabbage, water flasks, and two sealed vials of Dark Moon—one for strength, the other for warmth. He lays out his armor, inspects it, then folds it into the cart’s chest, atop his spare gloves and stone oil. The short sword follows, sharp and worn but reliable. Finally, he tightens the last strap on the crate and closes it.

He brushes Knuckle's mane once and murmurs, "One more road, old beast. Try not to die before I do."

By dawn, they are already leaving the lower city through the north gate, wheels rattling on frost-bitten cobbles. The road climbs slowly but steadily, passing thinning woods, forgotten shrines, and rusted signposts buried in root and shadow. The wind gets sharper as the path narrows, but the silence is what bites most.

It's not the peace of emptiness—it's the hush of a place that doesn't want to be disturbed.

Golar lights his pipe and squints into the grey mountain light. "Even the stone's holdin' its breath."

The final slope twists around a crag and opens into a sunken vale at the base of a granite cliff. Overgrown trees claw at the edge of a long-forgotten clearing, and there—just ahead—rests the crypt.

Its roofline is low, a squat square of heavy stonework nearly swallowed by vines and lichen. The once-imposing portico is cracked, the carved face of the noble sigil above the door worn down to a whisper of its former shape. The lintel has split diagonally, displaced by years of frostbite, and one column leans inward like it's tired of pretending.

Golar steps down from the cart, his boots crunching the moss-crusting path. He takes a long look, hands on his hips.

"Looks like it's held together with regret and old curses."

He moves closer, brushing back vines to inspect the portico's seam. With two fingers, he tests the fracture line, feeling the shift in pressure beneath the weight.

"It's cracked clean. Cold got deep. Roof might've dropped stones inside."

Knuckle snorts behind him.

Golar rolls his shoulders, the mountain air biting through his cloak.

"Well," he mutters, pulling his gloves tight. "Let's see what your dead left behind."

The crypt groans as Golar forces the stone door inward, its hinges straining against rust and time. The sound echoes deep, swallowed quickly by the dead air inside. He steps in, lantern raised high, sword at his side.

The interior is colder than the mountain air—still, dense, layered with years of untouched rot. Dust swirls through the beam of light, coating the stone walls in a velvet of decay. The carvings lining the entry passage are old—pre-Empire style—showing stiff-faced dwarves with hammers raised and brows furrowed, guardians of a bloodline now forgotten even by its own descendants.

He moves slowly, boots crunching brittle fragments of fallen plaster and bits of bone scattered near a collapsed archway. One inner vault has given way, part of the ceiling bowed

in, stones shattered on the ground like broken teeth. Support beams long since rotted have left the space unstable, the weight above pressing down like a held breath.



“Rot got to the bones,” Golar mutters. “Not just the ones in the wall.”

He kneels to inspect one of the inner columns, running his fingers along the fracture line. The granite here has warped from years of shifting cold. He frowns and marks the point with a smear of chalk.

Then he hears a dry scrape. Then another. From deeper inside, behind the rubble.

He rises slowly.

Another sound—closer now.

Bursting from a gap in the collapsed tunnel like starved dogs, their skin hangs in grey strips, jaws slack but biting, their eyes gleam with sick hunger—crypt ghouls, driven mad by centuries of confinement and the thin whispers of undeath.

Golar steps back into a defensive stance, torch in one hand, sword drawn in the other.

“Should’ve known you’d be sniffin’ around the rot.”

The first ghoul lunges—Golar sidesteps and drives the torch into its face. It shrieks, clawing at the fire, and he brings the short sword down hard, cleaving into its neck.



The second swipes at his ribs—he spins, shield-less but focused, and kicks the creature into a pillar. It crumples for a breath, then leaps again. He buries his blade through its chest, twisting hard, then yanks it free with a grunt.

The third circles, crouching low.

Golar growls. “Come on, then. I’ve buried better beasts than you.”

It pounces—he ducks under its strike and slams the torch up into its mouth. The dry flesh ignites, black smoke pouring as the ghoul screams. Golar doesn’t wait—he drives the sword through its spine, pins it to the floor, and wrenches the blade free.

The crypt is silent again.

He stands there panting, blood and smoke thick in the air. His shoulder stings where one claw raked him shallowly, but he’s still breathing. Still upright.

“Should’ve been locked tighter,” he mutters, kicking one of the corpses aside. “And I’ll have to find where you crawled out from.”

He wipes his blade clean with a scrap of old robe, douses the torch slightly, and moves deeper.

The dead weren’t resting.

Not here.

The next morning, Golar returns to the crypt's interior, bandaged and stiff, but determined. His breath clouds in the cold air as he kneels by a cracked floor mosaic, clearing away debris and bone fragments. The pattern beneath—faded suns and crossed hammers—shifts oddly around a broken seam, like it was cut once and pieced back out of place.

He runs a finger along the joint.

“Too clean to be natural.”

He works slowly, prying up the mosaic with a flat iron wedge. The slab creaks, then shifts—revealing a square trapdoor of dark stone beneath. No hinges. No markings. Just a faint groove where it opens.

He breathes through his nose, mutters, “Nothing good ever lives under a hidden door,” and lifts it with a grunt.

A shaft drops into darkness below. The air that rises smells of long-closed spaces—old dust, dried blood, and silence. He lowers a rope and secures it, then tightens the strap on his belt and begins the descent.

The tunnel is narrow, circular, the walls fitted with stone bricks too fine to be recent. He's nearly halfway down when he hears the flutter.

Wings. Sharp and wrong.

Then pain.

A stirge slams into his shoulder—needle-like mouth biting into flesh through the gap in his pauldron. He roars, swinging backward, and hears the squelch as it's crushed against the wall.

But they're not alone.

Half a dozen of them swarm from cracks in the ceiling, shrieking in high-pitched screeches. Their wings are thin and sharp like stone knives, their bodies hard and leech-like. He drops the rope and slams into the wall, shield raised above his head as another latches onto his neck.

“By the Forge!”

He bashes upward, his hammer catching two in one swing. Blood trickles from his arm as another pierces his side—he rips it off and hurls it into the dark.

He tumbles the last few feet to the bottom, rolling onto stone with a grunt. The stirges follow—swooping, shrieking. He spins with his shield raised, batting two aside, then crushes the final one mid-air with a precise strike that leaves its twisted husk skidding across the floor.

Breathing heavy, Golar leans on his shield and spits blood. He pulls a bandage from his pouch, wraps his shoulder, and lights his lantern.

The chamber around him breathes to life in gold and shadow.

It's older than the crypt above—much older. The walls are carved smooth and tight, every angle precise. Inlaid along the lower wall are sigils—*Tharnic*, unmistakably. Their shapes curl like branches, or veins—lines of ancient authority.

Golar steps closer, trailing a hand along one symbol. It spirals. Not the goat-eye, not this time—but something near to it. A branching root, coiled inward.

He whispers, “So this is where the old ones hid the deeper bones.”

And he is not alone anymore.

The Tharnic sigils lead deeper into the mountain's bones, guiding Golar down a narrow hall with walls angled in geometric precision. His lantern throws long shadows ahead, and the air shifts—cooler, denser, touched with that particular weight that always comes before something meant to be forgotten.

At the end of the corridor, he finds it: a sealed archway of fitted stone, each block carved with lines of silent script. At the center, a circular seal—barely perceptible—cracked clean down the middle, likely weakened in the last quake. Golar sets his pick between the edge stones and slowly pries.

The wall yields with a low groan, and a rush of stale air escapes from the darkness beyond.

Inside, the chamber widens into a low-ceilinged sanctum. Dust lies thick, but undisturbed. At the center, lit by the trembling lantern flame, is an altar—raised slightly above the floor and hewn from gold-veined marble. It glows faintly, like firelight trapped inside the stone.

Golar steps forward.

The slab is finely worked, and though cracked along the edges, the surface is etched in the unmistakable symmetry of sacred Tharnic geometry—curves within curves, each aligning subtly with the walls and corners. He runs his fingers along one fracture, tracing the fault line as if reading a wound.

The room answers with a sound—not stone shifting, but something deeper.

A scrape.

A grinding hum.

Then a pulse.

He steps back just as the floor behind the altar splits open with mechanical precision. Rising slowly from beneath, a figure takes shape—its body of dark stone, veins of metal running through its arms and chest like channels of fire long cooled. Its face is a blank mask with a single slit, and its chest is etched with a coiling spiral.

A construct guardian.

Old Tharnic work.

It moves with unnatural grace, stepping free of its cradle and raising an arm that ends in a crushing slab of jointed marble. Golar barely dodges the first strike—the ground cracks where it lands, sending a tremor through the chamber.

He draws his short sword, but the blade barely chips the surface of its shoulder.

“Too thick,” he mutters, rolling away from another hammer-blow. “Too clean. Gotta break the *balance*.”

He surveys the room as he retreats—pillars supporting the low ceiling, their joints worn and cracked. One stands closer to the altar, its base already leaning slightly.

He draws it in.

Ducking beneath a strike, he loops behind the pillar and slams his hammer into the fracture at its base—not once, but three times, hard and fast.

The guardian approaches, raising its arm.

Golar throws his shoulder into the pillar.

With a groan of ancient stone, the column collapses sideways, crashing onto the guardian’s leg. It stumbles, stone cracking as its limb gives way under the weight.

Before it can recover, Golar swings wide and buries his pickaxe deep into the exposed join at its hip. The metal edge strikes true. With a final heave, he wrenches the pick free, and the construct crashes to the floor in pieces, its inner glow flickering out like a dying forge.

The room stills.

Only the sound of Golar’s breath remains—heavy, ragged, filled with blood and dust.

He slumps against the wall, sweat dripping from his brow, hands trembling.

“Didn’t ask for a statue to argue with,” he mutters. “But I’ve dealt with worse company.”

He lowers his head, closes his eyes for a moment, and lets the silence return—this time, hard-earned.

The shattered guardian lies still, fragments cooling in the dim hush of the relic chamber. Golar breathes deep, steadying his pulse, and rises to his feet with a slow grunt. His lantern flickers as he circles the altar again, more cautious this time, his muscles aching from the fight.

Behind the altar, half-hidden beneath a row of decorative stone trim, he notices a slight recess—no wider than his hand and outlined in a way that only a mason would think to look for. He presses two fingers into the hollow, feels a give, and pulls.

A thin panel slides free, revealing a niche carved deep into the wall.

Inside: a satchel of heavy, tarnished coins—Tharnic stamp still faintly visible, though dulled by time. Gold. At least five hundred pieces by the weight.

But it's the ring beside them that catches his eye.

Simple. Elegant. Dwarven-make. No gemstone, only a subtle band of interlocking triangles etched along its edge. He picks it up and feels the quiet hum of enchantment in the metal.

A ring of defense. The old kind. Meant to protect without notice.

He turns it once in the lamplight, then slides it into a pouch, pocketing the weight of history without a word. The coins he tucks away—earned. The ring... that's something else.

With care, he reseals the niche, replaces the fallen altar stone, and uses fresh mortar from his kit to patch the outer cracks. He cleans the area enough to pass inspection, but does not erase the memory. Just hides it. As was always done.

By dusk, he begins the slow walk down the mountain path, Knuckle loaded lightly, the cart creaking behind. The cold wind brushes at his hood. The sky above is steel-grey and silent, but Golar doesn't speak a word. The climb down is easier than the climb up—but heavier, somehow. It starts to rain.

Back in Felhedrin, he files a minimal report with House Mardhal: "Crypt stabilized. Interior cleared. One minor collapse repaired. No living threats remain."

They thank him. Pay him 50 gold.

No one asks about the deeper levels.

That night, at home, Golar sits at his desk with the lantern low and a thick candle burning. The room is quiet save for the occasional snap from the hearth.

He places the ring on the table in front of him, watching it catch the flame's glow.

His fingers drum the wood once, twice.

Then he mutters, half to the ring, half to himself, "Some things you don't invoice for."

And he slides it onto his finger.

Tavern

The hearth burns low in Golar's home, casting long shadows across the stone walls. Candles flicker atop the shelves in the library, and a warm stew scent lingers faintly in the air. Golar leans back in his chair, one boot kicked off, the other half-on. A mug of dark ale sits beside him, already half drained. Across the room, Gala sits cross-legged on a cushioned bench near the fire, a second mug in hand, cheeks pink from heat and drink.

She tilts her head at him with that familiar, mischievous grin. “You ever think this place could use a proper tavern down here?”

Golar raises a brow. “What, the kind where the ale’s warm, the chairs wobble, and someone sings off-key ‘til the walls crack?”

She chuckles. “No, I mean one for folk like *us*. You know—stone workers, scribes, bakers, cleaners. The ones who can’t afford the upper-circle halls or don’t belong in Guild lounges.”

“There’s the Dustbucket,” Golar mutters.

“That place serves beer in cracked tin and the stew’s mostly questions. Doesn’t count.”

He grunts, not disagreeing.

“I’m serious,” Gala says, sitting forward now. “No place down here for folk who don’t wear Guild badges or noble crests. Even the traders have a hall now. We’ve got nothing but cold stone and alley drink.”

Golar takes another slow sip, staring into the fire.

“So what—you want me to build you a tavern?”

“I want *us* to build one. Together. You’ve got stone sense. I’ve got charm and recipes. Could even set up a corner for songs or cards. Nothing fancy. Just honest stone, warm food, a roof that don’t leak, and walls that don’t judge.”

He snorts. “You’re talkin’ about building a place where *strangers* come knockin’.”

“I’m talking about a place where the *right* kind of strangers come knockin’—the kind who leave the old city politics outside.”

He leans back, the ale swirling quietly in his cup. “I build tombs, Gala. Cathedrals. Halls for dead kings and bloodlines no one remembers.”

“Then maybe it’s time you built something for the *living*.”

Golar falls quiet, eyes fixed on the fire. The mug in his hand feels heavier now. He doesn’t respond.

Gala finishes her drink and rises, brushing dust off her tunic. “Think on it. I know a corner near the old grain vaults—good traffic, strong stone. Could be ours.”

She heads to the door, tossing him a grin before slipping out into the tunnel’s chill.

Golar remains in his chair long after she’s gone, firelight flickering across his brow. He taps the edge of his mug once, then mutters under his breath,

“Building for strangers, eh? Hmph.”

But the idea sits there, warm and stubborn, like a stone you can't quite walk around.

The next day, Golar lights his pipe and sets off down one of the quieter arteries of the stone city, a route few bother with now—used more by wandering tradesmen and messengers than any official guild traffic. He walks in silence, smoke trailing behind him, until he reaches the corner Gala mentioned.

It's a disused cavern, low-ceilinged but dry, tucked behind what used to be an old water diversion tunnel, long since collapsed and sealed. The chamber is squat and oddly cozy, its walls thick with age-blackened limestone and an ancient sense of quiet. Echoes here are soft. The ground is packed and flat, and three trade routes spider off in nearby shafts—one toward the baker's ring, another toward the vent smiths, and a third into the deeper warehousing sectors.

Golar squats and runs his hand along the stone. Solid. Dry. Quiet.

"Could work," he mutters.

That evening, he and Gala sit by his workbench with parchment rolled out between mugs. She sketches with a charred stick, grinning as she talks.

"Main hearth goes *here*, right near the back, with a flue into the old smoke shaft. Heavy-timber bar across the front wall. Mixed seating—stone benches, some wooden chairs, booths if we can find scrap from the carpenters."

Golar grunts in approval, nudging her sketch with a chisel handle. "That support'll need reinforcement. Ceiling'll sag if we carve out too wide."

Gala rolls her eyes. "You say that like I didn't grow up under ceilings that breathe."

"Just sayin'."

But they smile, both of them.

Then comes the real test—permission.

Golar dons his working tunic, straightens his beard, and makes the long walk to the Guild Hall, tucked into the stone heart of Felhedrin. It's a place of echoing halls, groaning doors, and the scent of old ink and older sweat.

At the permissions desk, he's greeted by a clerk who looks like he hasn't left his chair in fifty years—bald, liver-spotted, glasses perched on a nose like a cliff ledge. Golar presents his form with gruff civility.

"Requesting use of sealed cavern chamber off the third vent passage—adjacent to trade tunnels 12, 19, and 23. Structural work and reinforcement planned. Mixed-function civic use."

The clerk squints at the form.

“Purpose?”

Golar clears his throat. “Tavern.”

The clerk blinks slowly. “You want to open a tavern? Down there?”

“Aye.”

“For who?”

Golar leans slightly forward. “Everyone.”

The clerk’s mouth twitches. “Mixed clientele?”

Golar nods once. “The stone don’t care who walks through the door. Neither will the walls.”

The clerk scribbles for a long moment. “This’ll raise eyebrows.”

“Let it,” Golar says.

“Fine. Submission noted. Expect review in a week. Try not to start building before the ink’s dry.”

Golar turns, pipe already back between his teeth.

He mutters to himself as he walks back through the long halls, “First stone’s laid, and it ain’t even touched the ground yet.”

The undercity whispers travel fast, even when carried on cracked stone and the silence between pick strikes. Within days of submitting the request, Golar begins to hear them—snide remarks, passing grumbles.

“Golar’s building a surfacer inn.”

“He wants humans down here? Next we’ll have elves playing flutes in the latrine.”

“A tavern with no crest and no code? It’ll be full of coinless layabouts and mud-footed traders.”

At first, Golar ignores them. He’s worked through worse than petty talk. But the words begin to reach deeper circles—Guild masons, tool keepers, even quartermasters—and one day, while picking up new chisels at the tool market near the central shaft, the confrontation comes.

Elder Rhundrik steps out from behind a stone vendor’s awning, arms folded, eyes like granite slabs. Golar recognizes the stance. The one used when someone thinks their words should carry weight just by existing.

“You’re really going to go through with this?” Rhundrik says, nodding toward the chisels in Golar’s hand. “A tavern for... anyone?”

Golar raises a brow. “That’s the idea.”

Rhundrik scoffs. “You let humans in, then halflings. Then travelers. Next thing you know, we’ll have surfacers pissing in sacred drains and tracking boot filth through Guild lanes.”

Golar sighs, setting the chisels down and turning fully to face him.

“This isn’t about *them*. It’s about *us*. The ones who lay stone and raise pipes and clean soot. The ones who work and drink and bleed and don’t have a place that belongs to them.”

Rhundrik narrows his eyes. “You’re forgetting who built this city, Golar.”

“No,” Golar says, voice steady. “I *remember* who built it. I see their names every time I chisel into a wall no one visits anymore. This tavern ain’t a threat. It’s a hearth. And if that offends the ones with crests, then maybe they’ve forgotten what warmth feels like.”

Rhundrik leaves in silence, but the disapproval weighs heavy.

That night, Golar sits at his desk, fingers curled around a half-empty mug of ale, the plans for the tavern rolled out before him. He hasn’t touched them in an hour. Just stares.

Gala arrives without knocking, a small parcel of food in hand and eyes sharp enough to cut stone.

“I heard Rhundrik found you.”

Golar nods without looking up. “He thinks it’ll rot the city from the inside.”

She sets the parcel down, sits across from him. “And what do you think?”

“I think I’m tired of hearing the stone groan under the weight of old rules.” He exhales slowly. “But maybe he’s right. Maybe this doesn’t belong.”

Gala leans forward, placing her hand gently on the edge of the plans.

“You’ve built for kings and priests, for dead names and closed doors. You made things that last because someone told you they were worthy. But this one? Build it for *yourself*. For the ones no one builds for.”

Golar’s hand rests quietly over the sketched foundation line. His thumb taps once. Then again.

“Alright,” he says, softly. “Then we build.”

The next morning, Golar tightens his belt, slings his tool satchel over his shoulder, and sets out toward the edge of Felhedrin where the old quarries sit silent under dust and time. The guards posted there don’t ask questions—he’s known by name and stone—and soon he’s loading up his cart with solid-cut blocks of dark-grey foundation stone, quarried decades ago and left unused in a moss-covered stockyard.

A few days later, he wheels two barrels of leftover Dark Moon ale to a carpenter's enclave near the lower heating ducts. The lead woodsmith eyes the barrels, tastes a thimble of the brew, coughs, laughs, and agrees on the spot.

"Four stacks of surplus timber," she says. "You're not just buying wood—you're buying forgiveness for my sinuses."

The beams arrive that night.

By the week's end, word spreads. Not just the rumors, but the truth of it. Dresa shows up first, carrying two mallets and a grin.

"You carve, we carry," she says, her sleeves already rolled.

Harven, a quiet tunnel-bracer with a cracked shield on his back, follows with heavy lifting arms and little to say, but more to give.

Even Mireek—stoic, pale-eyed, once a mason who turned to brewing—arrives with a crowbar and his old apron still marked with lime stains. "Haven't lifted stone in ten years," he mutters, "but I remember where it sings."

The days become rhythm.

Stone by stone, Golar sets the walls with his own hands, each block squared and aligned to the older Tharnic methods—angled slightly inward at the base for strength, layered with gravel between for pressure dispersion. His arms burn. His back aches. But each block set feels like writing his name into something real.

Gala takes over the kitchen layout—she brings in old iron cooktops, hangs herbs from crossbeams, tests recipes that fill the worksite with the scent of garlic, root broth, and smoked meat. Between breaks, she nails up soft-colored tapestries, lays out wool rugs scavenged from trader sales, and lines a shelf with strange mugs, no two the same.

Every now and then, she and Golar argue—over placement, over wall thickness, over the slope of the bar's footrest—but it always ends in laughter or mockery.

On the seventh night, with the last stone set and the timber frame sealed in place, they stand outside the rough-hewn entrance with a blank lintel waiting above the door.

"Let me do the carving," Gala says.

"You sure?" Golar squints. "You still carve like you're writing on bread."

She nudges him hard in the ribs. "You lay the letters, I'll guide the chisel."

Together they work, hand over hand, cutting the phrase into the smooth granite.

"The Cave Rat – All Are Welcome."

Golar steps back, arms crossed, pipe between his teeth.

“It’s not a cathedral,” he says, voice low.

“No,” Gala replies, brushing stone dust from her sleeves. “It’s better.”

The lanterns burn low, their light soft and amber against the new stone walls. The hearth crackles, flames dancing around thick logs from the upper stores. The scent of meat stew drifts across the tavern—hearty, salted, and heavy with root vegetables and marrow. Mugs clink. Boots shuffle. Someone coughs near the back.

The Cave Rat is open.

Not packed. Not loud. But alive.

A pair of soot-faced miners sit near the hearth, hunched over their mugs and speaking in low tones. An apprentice mason, barely out of his training, stares wide-eyed at the carvings along the wall while nervously sipping dark ale. Two surface traders sit at the long table near the front, their coats dusted from road travel, hands warming on clay cups of Gala’s spiced broth.

And near the corner, strumming a tiny lute with fingers that twitch too fast to be sober, a halfling minstrel plays a meandering tune—half song, half question, just testing how much music the walls will hold.

Golar stands behind the bar, hands resting on the polished wood, cloth dangling from one wrist. He says little, just watches.

The sound in the room is humble, steady—a hum of presence, of belonging. A kind of breathing. No laughter yet, but voices mingle. People lean in. The firelight catches in their mugs like old coin.

Gala walks up beside him, wiping flour from her fingers with a bit of torn rag.

“Well?” she asks, voice soft but gleaming with victory. “You see it?”

Golar glances across the room.

A place with no crests on the wall. No emblems. Just stone, warmth, and the scent of fresh bread.

“See it?” he mutters.

She raises an eyebrow.

He grunts, watching the fire throw light across the old mining gear nailed above the hearth.

Then he smiles.

“One stone at a time.”

Guilds Orders

The order comes stamped in blue wax—the color reserved for urgent infrastructure risks. Golar opens it without ceremony, reading the dense script by the firelight with a steaming mug of tea in hand. It's not glamorous work, but it's work all the same.

Guild Directive 7-31: Immediate assessment of crypt structure beneath Sector Nine-Low. Partial flooding due to suspected spring runoff, likely caused by redirected aquifer tunnels during upper city expansion. Stability compromised. Recovery and report required.

He sets the parchment down and exhales through his nose. "Fix the leak, clear the mess, patch the bones—easy, right?"

By midmorning, he's geared up. Waterproof boots, lantern, ropes, long-handled chisel, and a hardened pack of tools sealed in waxed leather. He slings them over Knuckle's cart for the first stretch, then leaves the mule behind where the tunnel narrows too tight for wheels.

The descent is rough. Sector Nine-Low hasn't seen steady traffic in decades—the corridor walls are cracked, and the ceiling weeps condensation in slow, steady drips. The air grows cold and stale as he moves deeper, the scent of wet stone mixed with something older... like rot buried under lime.

The final shaft descends through a break in the old guild sewer. Golar lowers himself down with rope, boots slipping once on the moss-slicked stones before he lands with a squelch.

Water.

Knee-deep, cold, and unmoving.

He swings his lantern up. The space ahead opens into a wide chamber—once ceremonial, now ghostly. Columns rise half-submerged. Inscriptions ripple beneath the surface. The air presses close, thick with damp and silence.

"Should've charged double," he mutters, adjusting his gloves and wading in.

Each step is slow, cautious. The moss-covered flagstones are slick, and beneath the water's still surface, debris stirs faintly.

This place was never meant to be seen again. But now it's drowning in memory—and he's here to breathe life into it once more.

The stillness of the crypt masks its quiet disobedience—walls not cracking, but *sagging*, joints loosening not from violence, but the slow pull of water and weight. Golar moves carefully, lantern held high in one hand, a thick chalk stick in the other. At intervals he pauses, marking elevation changes on what's left of the columns, checking the slope of the floor by eye and feel.

A taut plumb line dangles from his belt, guiding him to points where water gathers deepest. He squats to sketch a rough outline onto oilskin parchment—an improvised map of water flow.

The water, he notes grimly, runs too *true*. It's not pooling randomly—it's following a path, carved unbidden through stone that wasn't meant to carry it.

He pushes deeper, past low arches and down a side hallway where the walls close tight and the ceiling droops. Names once carved into the stone rest here in silence—now warped and moss-covered, unreadable under tendrils of lichen and wet grime. The air smells of stagnant years.

“Not forgotten,” he murmurs. “Just softened.”

He presses forward, and soon the corridor opens into a small side chamber.

The ground here dips sharply—too sharply. And the smell changes. Not just water now. Wet earth. Freshly broken stone.

At the far edge of the room, one wall has split open. A partial cave-in, the kind caused by pressure on weak stone. Earth has slumped inward, bringing with it runoff from some redirected channel above—probably from a foolish surface engineer who never checked old maps.

The breach breathes cold air into the crypt. Rock here is pale and eroded, soft with mineral streaks and hollow pockets.

Golar crouches to study the base of the cavity, his fingers dragging through the muck.

Then he freezes.

Claw marks.

Not the kind left by tools. These are irregular, deeply scored into the mud. Four-fingered, curved, with drag lines where something moved—something *big*.

And near the edge, half buried beneath slick moss and stone grit, he finds a length of shed skin—scaled, dark, and reeking faintly of sulfur.

He picks it up slowly, holding it to the light.

“By the stone gods...”

He lets it fall back into the water.

Whatever caused the breach wasn't just runoff.

Something *crawled through it*.

Golar returns before dawn, breath clouding in the undercity chill, boots slapping wet stone as he hauls his gear down the shafts. This time, he comes prepared—iron bracing spikes, thick rope coils, a bundle of patch cloth, and a hand-pulled pump cart fitted with a rusted bellows and one stubborn wheel. He'd meant to bring a meal too, but left the stew behind in the rush.

"Could've brought warmth," he mutters, dragging the cart behind him. "But no—brought iron and regrets."

The crypt is darker today. The lantern light seems dimmer in the flooded chamber, as though the walls have sunk deeper into silence. He makes his way toward the collapsed wall where the water runs faster now, the breach glistening like a wound.

He drops his gear, kneels beside the breach, and begins hammering the first support spike into place.

That's when he hears it.

A wet slither. Then another.

He turns—too late.

From the black crack in the rock, a long, pale shape spills into the water. Then another. Then a third.



Slick, scaled, low to the ground, and too long for comfort—lizard-like, but wrong. Limbs bent oddly, eyes white and clouded from dark living. One hisses, slow and low, lips curling back to reveal teeth like hooked nails.

“Right,” Golar mutters. “Guess we’re not alone.”

The first lunges.

He slips backward in the water, catches himself with one hand, and swings the other—his pick handle cracks against the creature’s skull, but it doesn’t stop. The second circles, slicing through the water with a hiss.

Golar kicks, boots splashing, fending it off just in time.

The third strikes. He feels its jaws clamp into his shoulder, tearing through cloak and leather. He snarls in pain, slamming the beast against the wall with his elbow. It squeals and loosens just enough for him to grab his chisel from his belt.

He plunges it deep into the lizard’s throat, and the creature jerks, shudders, then stills.

Blood mixes with cold water. His shoulder screams.

He staggers back, breath ragged, leaning against the stone as the other two retreat into the dark, watching from beyond the breach. They do not pursue.

“Smart enough to test,” he growls, clutching at his shoulder. “Not smart enough to win.”

He tears a strip from his cloak and binds the wound with shaky hands, wincing as the wet cloth presses in.

“Should’ve brought stew instead of guts.”

He slumps back against the pump cart, water lapping at his knees, and waits for the pain to settle into something he can walk with.

The lizards are gone for now. But the breach isn’t just a leak anymore.

It’s a door.

By the next morning, Golar’s wound is wrapped tighter, stiff beneath his coat, but no less sharp. He winces as he hauls the last of the iron supports into place beside the breach, hammer striking stone with the slow rhythm of pain.

The lizards didn’t return.

He drives the spikes deep into the cavity’s edge, anchoring thick support bars between eroded seams. Then come the stone wedges—cut and shaped the night before. He sets them one by one, muttering under his breath with each impact.

“Stone won’t lie if you make it listen.”

Once the breach is braced and stable, he takes a pick and begins carving a narrow trench from the crypt’s lowest corner to the ancient shaft beyond—a forgotten vent that once served a

cooling chamber in the days before the city ran deep. It's clogged with old debris, but gravity and steel still obey the hand.

Hours pass.

When he finishes and the trench runs clean, the water begins to pull away, slow at first, then more steadily. The crypt drains like a buried lung exhaling. As the floor emerges from beneath the murk, Golar sees what time and flood tried to hide.

Scattered bones, curled in unnatural piles. Shackles embedded in stone. Rusted chain links thick with mineral buildup. Prisoners, maybe. Or guardians. Buried and forgotten beneath the ruin of careless maps and broken tunnels.

He doesn't stop to wonder. Just notes the markers, then seals the upper shaft with a fitted stone cap—smooth, thick, meant to last.

He takes his chisel and carves into the face of the stone:

“Channel Set by Hand – G. of Throgar’s Belly.”

Not for pride. Just truth.

By nightfall, he returns home soaked to the bone and limping, mud-crusting boots trailing silt across the stone floor. He drops his tools in the corner, peels off his coat, and lights the fire with shaking fingers.

The first mug of ale goes down hard. The second eases the ache.

He settles into his chair, legs outstretched toward the fire, pipe hanging loose from the side of his mouth.

He exhales slowly, watching the smoke drift to the ceiling.

“Never trust the quiet jobs,” he mutters.

Then he leans back and lets the warmth take him.

Tharn’s Span Bridge

The message from the Guild isn't sealed in wax—it's stamped in urgency. A runner finds Golar just after dawn, catching him mid-breakfast with a heel of bread in one hand and a piece of hard cheese in the other.

“Span's down,” the courier says, breathless. “The Tharn's Span. Collapsed last night under freight weight. Guild wants you there.”

Golar grunts, mouth still full. “Knew it would.”

By midday, he's at the site—where the once-proud stone bridge spanned the chasm between Felhedrin's inner valley and the lower caravan route. Now it lies in fragments across the gorge below, chunks of ash-grey granite jutting like broken teeth from the riverbed.

Scaffolding already rises on both ends—hastily assembled timber towers, cloth banners fluttering with noble sigils and engineering crests. Surface engineers move like ants, their coats fine-stitched and their tools shining. A half-dozen of them stand around a chalk-marked board, gesturing wildly with compasses and scrolls while arguing in clipped tones.

“Steel lattice,” one insists. “Riveted spans.”

“Too heavy at the centerline,” another counters.

“We use modern mortar and resin—skip the deep-set basework.”

“No need for stone at all. It's inefficient.”

Golar steps forward, boots crunching gravel.

The engineers glance at him, eyes flicking down to his worn cloak and dust-covered satchel. One of them lifts an eyebrow.

“You must be the... local?”

“Golar,” he replies simply. “Guild sent me.”

Another engineer—tall, younger, more finely dressed—chuckles. “We've got modern methods in place. Don't worry, Master Golar. You're welcome to observe, but we've moved past stone-cut keystones and arched bonding.”

Golar doesn't answer. He walks to the edge of the scaffold, kneels, and runs his hand along the shattered edge of the bridge. He finds one of the old keystones—cracked down the middle, not broken, but stressed too long without support. The pier below is flaked, worn to its core. Arches no longer align. The bridge didn't fail all at once.

He mutters, “Didn't fall. It was let down.”

A Guild overseer approaches—short-bearded, blunt-faced, with the heavy scroll of appointment in hand.

“Master Golar. The Guild grants you lead mason status for structural correction.”

Golar rises, brushing dirt from his hands.

“You want it fixed, it's stone first. No glue, no polished iron fantasies.”

The overseer clears his throat. “There's a condition. You're to work with the surface team. Or not at all.”

Golar narrows his eyes, glancing back at the arguing engineers.

Then turns to the overseer.

“Fine. They want a lesson in stone?”

He pats the cracked keystone once.

“They’ll get it.”

Rain had been whispering threats all week, but when the valley sky finally breaks, it does so with the fury of a cracked dam. Sheets of water slam into scaffolds, wash over packed soil, and roll down the crumbled flanks of the collapsed bridge.

By then, Golar’s crew is already working—dwarves from the lower city, some surface laborers, and two skeptical Guild apprentices. Golar’s hands are thick with mortar dust as he leads the rebuilding of the central support using an old dry-laid corbel technique. Stone wedges are angled in progressive layers, weight sliding inward to carry tension without mortar. It’s slow work, precise, and utterly unfamiliar to the surface engineers.

“You can’t build wet-dry in open air,” one mutters, arms crossed, watching from behind a soaked cloak. “The water’ll break the friction. Modern bonding is safer.”

Golar doesn’t even look up. “Stone doesn’t fear water. It fears weakness.”

When the rains come, their timber supports and resin-bound mortar walls wash into slurry.

Golar’s stonework stands. Unshaken.

By the third day, engineers speak less. One even takes notes.

But that night, a murmur runs through the workers’ tents.

A laborer, young and broad-shouldered, had gone off with a cart to haul extra stone from the quarry edge and hadn’t come back. They find him at dawn, half-buried in silt, bleeding from a long gash down his side, his eyes wide and unfocused.

“It moved,” he stammers. “Stone... no—boulder. It had tusks. Eyes. It *breathed*.”

Some laugh nervously. Others don’t.

Golar narrows his eyes, tightens the strap on his shoulder brace, and sets off toward the quarry.

The air is still and heavy near the dig line. Rain has slowed, but the ground is slick with mud and broken cart tracks. He moves past the last cut block, into the overhang where tools were stored—now scattered, a tarp ripped open like old bread.

He kneels.

Claw marks. Deep. Irregular. Not the scrape of tools. Five-fingered gouges in the clay and rock.

Nearby, a wide burrow dips into the quarry wall—barely visible at a glance, but unmistakably dug. The edge is lined with torn canvas and bits of bone. Fresh. Still white.

Golar leans close, picking up a piece of shattered tusk.

“Whatever it was,” he mutters, standing slowly, “it wasn’t sleeping.”

He looks down the dark throat of the tunnel.

And it wasn’t finished.

Golar returns to camp with storm in his beard and grim weight in his shoulders. He doesn’t need books or beastscribes to name the thing now. He’s seen its burrow, its tusks, the gouges deep enough to bite into granite. The old dwarves called them **Stoneback Groats**—ancient cave-beasts that feed on minerals and slumber for decades until disturbed.

This one had likely been roused by the surface team’s quarry blasting. And now it had taken residence beneath the far arch, directly under the foundation site.

Steel won’t pierce it. Not through that back.

“Steel bounces off it like raindrops,” he mutters as he spreads his map across the workbench that evening. “You fight it head-on, you just get buried.”

He sketches quickly, the plan taking shape with each mark: a retaining wall made to look solid, but hollow-backed. Oil sacks hidden beneath it, laid shallow in grooves. Anchored chains at key slopes—weighted to trigger a slip in the ledge if pulled.

His crew eyes him warily. Gala, who’s arrived late with food and a frown, leans over the drawing.

“This isn’t a trap,” she says. “It’s a performance.”

“It’s *dwarven engineering*,” Golar replies. “Built to survive, not to impress.”

Two days pass. The next storm rolls in—heavy skies, rain like hammers, wind tearing at tarps and ropes. Golar stands beneath the arch near the decoy wall, lantern in hand, chains rigged, oil slick fresh from barrels and stretched in a crescent arc along the slope.

The Groat comes at dusk, its breathing a seismic rhythm underfoot. Massive, low-slung, its back a mound of jagged stone, tusks curling like rusted scythes. It snorts, sniffs the stone.

Then it charges.

Golar turns and runs—not away, but *down*, leading the beast along the soaked slope. Thunder cracks. The Groat bellows.

At the right moment, he hurls the lantern over his shoulder. It shatters across the oil arc.

The slope erupts in light.

The Groat rears, blinded, tusks flailing.



Golar yanks the chain.

A shelf of stone, undermined days before, breaks free. With a rumble and a shriek of sliding earth, the ledge beneath the Groat gives way.

The beast tumbles—tusks first—into the side ravine, crashing through wet rock and tangled root. A final bellow echoes, pained and angry, before it vanishes into the deep caves beyond.

Injured. Alive. But gone.

Golar, covered in soot and mud, leans against the last anchor post and exhales hard.

He looks up at the crew, now gathered in shocked silence.

“Bridge is clear,” he growls. “Back to work.”

The sky clears for the first time in over a week, pale blue stretching like new linen over the valley. The rivers below still run thick with mud, but the air feels lighter, as though the weight of storms—both sky-born and stone-deep—has finally passed.

At the center of the Tharn’s Span, Golar stands atop a scaffold platform, final keystone balanced in a sling beside him. The support arches curve up on either side, dry-set with precision, bonded now with centuries-old technique that speaks in compression and weight—not glue.

He brushes dust from the keystone's face, taps it once with the heel of his hand, then hoists it into place.

A slow creak.

A deep settling.

The whole bridge sighs into balance.

It's done.

The surface engineers linger nearby, not quite gathering around but not fleeing either. One of them—a lean man with ink-stained cuffs and a still-damp notebook—nods once.

“Unexpected technique,” he admits. “But... undeniably sound.”

Another mutters, “Wouldn't have thought dry-set would last.”

“It will,” Golar says without turning. “Long after your resin cures and cracks.”

Later, near the staging tents, a caravan master with a sun-scorched face and an ox tattooed on his neck presses a thick iron flask into Golar's palm.

“Dwarf-aged brandy,” the man says. “Thirty years in rock oak. You made the road whole again. That deserves more than silver.”

Golar nods and pockets the flask with a grunt. “Coin's for the guild. Brandy's for the bones.”

Before the crews pull down the scaffold, he returns once more to the underside of the arch—alone, quiet. Kneeling in the shadow beneath the span, he chisels his mark low and clean into the belly of the stone. Not the guild crest, not his full name.

Just a phrase:

“For those who carry more than coin.”

By sunset, the first caravan crosses.

Wagon wheels clatter in rhythmic confidence, hooves ring against clean-cut stone, and voices echo across the gorge for the first time in weeks. Trade moves again. Life flows. No one looks down. No one ever does.

But Golar stands beneath the span, one hand on the cool arch.

“This'll hold,” he murmurs. “Even if no one else does.”

And then he walks away, the sound of crossing carts fading behind him like rain long passed.

An Ancient Wall

The summons comes not through the Guild, but straight from the undercity's edge—scribbled in coal on scrap and carried by a panting courier with dirt still on his face. *"Come quick. Shaft D-11. Something's wrong. Miners won't go back in."*

Golar grumbles as he reads it, pulling his coat off the wall peg with a huff. The ale in his cup is still warm, his boots barely dry from the last week's work. But the words *"sealed wall"* and *"sigils"* catch his eye like a jagged chisel point.

"Stone don't speak," he mutters as he straps on his lantern harness, "unless someone's loosening it."

Shaft D-11 lies at the far end of the deep-mine web, tucked into older strata where fault lines run like half-buried veins. The shaft's mouth is choked with support beams groaning from age, and the air tastes of old dust and rusted copper. By the time Golar arrives, the crew's already scattered—just the foreman waits with a flickering torch and sweat streaking through the soot on his face.

"They heard it again last night," the foreman says. "Low—like... not words, but close. Chantin'. From behind the wall."

Golar snorts. "It's rock echo. Wind in a cracked seam. Or your crew's been down too long without daylight."

He moves inside without waiting for a reply.

The tunnel curves sharply, narrowing into a passage where timbers bow from stress. And there it is—the wall in question. Not natural. Not decorative. Laid stone, thick, and covered in carvings worn nearly smooth by time and mineral bleed.

He runs his hand along the sigils, brushing away flakes of white salt bloom. They're dwarven, but not arcane.

"Clan-marks," he says aloud. "Tharnic age. And warning runes—old ones. 'Keep sealed. Faulted ground. No passage to the blood dark.'" He leans in, inspecting the seams where the wall meets the bedrock. Fine fissures trace out behind it—too clean to be tool-cut.

He raps a knuckle against the lower stones.

Hollow.

A shift in the weight behind it.

Seismic pressure has opened a crack. Not wide, but enough.

He steps back, thoughtful.

“This wall’s holdin’ more than dust,” he mutters. “And someone thought long ago it was worth keepin’ shut.”

He turns to the foreman, who’s lingering just out of reach of the lantern light.

“Get me two strong backs, a bracing frame, and a fresh rope. If this wall’s coming down, we’re doing it on my terms.”

Golar braces his boots against the loose scree of Shaft D-11’s far bend as his hammer chimes once, twice, then three times against the side support of the sealed wall. Around him, two younger miners steady the braces and keep the lanterns close, their faces pale but steady. The warning sigils are mostly intact, but the keystone at the wall’s base—centered like a silent eye—is ready to come free.

“Pull slow,” Golar mutters, sliding his pry-bar into the seam. “If something behind it breathes, better we hear it first than feel it.”

With a final wedge, the keystone gives.

There is no sound of falling rock. Just a long, slow sigh of air—*hot*, stale, and foul, as though something deep beneath the stone has been holding its breath for a hundred years and just now remembered how to exhale. It pushes against their faces, thick with minerals and decay, and carries on it a sound not like wind.

It’s low. Rolling. A pressure, more than a voice.

Golar stiffens. “Hold.”

They widen the breach with slow care, removing stone by stone until a person could crouch and pass through. When the dust clears, their lanterns catch the edge of a wide, uneven cavern—natural, not cut. The ceiling arches high into shadow, stalactites dripping from above like stone teeth. The walls glisten where groundwater once carved deep veins, and at the floor’s center lie scattered signs of entry long past: broken packs, rusted picks, the splintered remains of crates and rope, and here and there, a glint of coin.

Gem-light winks from a loose pile near a long-collapsed tunnel.

One of the younger miners leans closer. “What is this place?”

Golar’s eyes don’t leave the dark ahead.

“Forgotten,” he says flatly.

Then—movement. A shift in the far shadows. Quick, low. Gone in an instant.

“Back,” Golar snaps, his voice sharp but quiet. “No further.”

They withdraw. He orders the breach braced but left half-open, shoring it with crossbars and marker flags. He sends the two miners to fetch the mine guards, leaving torch bundles and rope reels nearby for quick closure.

“We don’t seal it yet,” he tells the foreman. “But nothing goes in or out without a pair of armed eyes.”

That night, as the crew sets camp a tunnel away, the growling resumes.

Not wind.

Not water.

And sometime after midnight, as Golar lies awake with his hand on the hilt of his short sword, he hears it clearly.

A scrape.

Stone on stone.

As though something inside the cavern is testing the breach, pressing claws to the wall.

Waiting.

Golar returns at first light, the weight of restless sleep still in his bones. He brings with him six mine guards—crossbows slung across their backs, pickaxes strapped to belts, and grim faces that know what it means to patrol tunnels where things don’t belong. Behind them trail a dozen miners, each bearing timber, wedges, lanterns, and tools for reinforcement.

Golar runs a gloved hand along the braced edge of the breach. The stone feels warm—wrongly so. He glances to the captain of the guard. “We reinforce it before anything breathes again. Vault pressure’s unstable.”

But before the first hammer falls, the wall explodes.

Stone shards rain outward as the inner breach bursts like a cracked tooth. A scream—high, shrill, and too full of breath for any man—shatters the quiet. From the dust, it charges: thin but long-limbed, sinewed wings half-folded and tail lashing wildly behind.

A young cave wyvern.

Its scaled hide is a patchwork of stone-gray and wet shale, its jaws too wide for its slender head, lined with teeth that shimmer like wet quartz. Its front talons rake through the nearest worker, tossing him back like a sack of mud.

Chaos breaks.

Golar shouts, “Down! Pull back!” but two miners are already crushed under a single flailing wing.

The guards respond fast—crossbows fire, bolts skittering off the wyvern’s side. A few strike deep, but not enough to slow it. The tail lashes in a wild arc and smashes a main support beam—*crack!* The ceiling groans, a rain of gravel hissing down.

Golar doesn't flinch. He draws his short sword and grabs a hook from the gear pile. "Flank left! Aim low!"



Three guards follow, engaging the beast with hammers, axes, and hooked chains. Blood and screams echo in the narrow tunnel.

Another tail swipe knocks two guards flat—one slams into the scaffold and doesn't rise. A third is trampled as the wyvern pivots, its neck twisting like a whip, jaw snapping blindly at torchlight.

Golar ducks under a lunge, drives his hook into its shoulder, and holds. "Now!" he bellows.

One guard—still standing—leaps forward with a mining spear, drives it hard into the wyvern's open throat just as Golar shoves a fallen beam across its neck, pinning it downward.

The beast thrashes, wings battering the walls, its scream shrieking through the tunnel like splitting metal. Blood sprays, thick and black as tar.

Then silence.

It dies there, mouth slack and fangs bared, crushed under weight and pierced through with steel and bone.

Golar slumps beside the corpse, breathing hard, his arm bleeding from a shallow tear. Four guards lie dead. Eight miners, too—bodies still and soaked in muck and ash.

He presses a hand to the tunnel wall.

“You didn’t fall,” he mutters. “You let us down again.”

Then he straightens.

“There’ll be no sealing this with timber.”

Once the wyvern’s blood has cooled and the dead are laid respectfully in canvas wraps near the shaft’s edge, silence returns to Shaft D-11. But it’s not the silence of threat anymore—it’s the deep, exhausted hush of those who’ve survived and want to know what it was all *for*.

Golar doesn’t wait long. With his arm freshly bandaged and lantern raised, he leads the remaining miners and guards through the breached wall and into the cavern’s heart. The air still carries heat and stench, but the oppressive weight has lifted.

What they find inside is not just stone and rot.

Scattered through the chamber like a shattered memory are pouches of uncut gems—twenty in all, bundled in cracked dwarven leather. They lie beside tangled chains and coin spills, great mounds of tarnished silver and gold: two thousand gold pieces by rough count, five hundred silver, and among them, relics half-consumed by time.

Golar picks up a dwarven sword first—its edge dulled, but the clan markings along the fuller still legible. *Karrg’s Make*, from the western forges. A blade gone missing during a caravan ambush thirty years past.

Silver goblets with rim-cracks and soot stains. Two cracked statues of old miners carved in Tharnic posture, kneeling before a stone wheel. Blackened tools, worn but recognizable, tied into bundles with frayed twine.

The wyvern, he realizes, hadn’t just nested here—it had *collected*. Through cracks and crawlspaces, it must have found its way to old tunnels, collapsed roads, lost caravans, even the corpses of the forgotten. All of it dragged here, hoarded, piled like bones under an ancient altar.

One of the miners crouches by a coin mound, staring. “This... this is the shipment my da was guarding. The *whole* cart went missing.”

Golar doesn’t look away from the sword. “No heirs down here,” he says, voice low. “No names on the coins. No guild seals on the goblets.”

He turns, eyes scanning the others—mud-streaked, bloodied, and still standing.

“We all bled for it. We all take it.”

There’s a moment of silence.

Then the foreman, standing tall despite a slinged arm, nods. “Even split. Fair work, fair claim.”

The hoard is counted by torchlight. Each survivor—miners and guards alike—takes home coin, or gem, or relic. Some choose keepsakes. Others choose weight.

Golar pockets nothing at first, then finally sets the old dwarven sword over his shoulder, saying nothing.

Outside, the cavern is sealed with a fitted wall, reinforced with steel clamps and a Guild-marked sigil of closure—not as a tomb, but as a warning.

As they leave, Golar looks once more into the now-dark passage, hand resting on the cold stone.

“Some things, we bury twice,” he mutters.

The days that follow bring no more screams, no tail swipes, no flicker of unnatural breath. What remains is work—honest, steady work that Golar knows better than blood and glory.

With the cavern sealed and the hoard accounted for, Golar sets to rebuilding the breach with new hands and stronger stone. The wall, once a forgotten warning now rewritten in blood and soot, rises again—this time taller, deeper-set, and reinforced with interlocking joints and iron clamps. No timber. Only things that last.

Before the final stone is laid, Golar steps forward with mallet and chisel. He recuts the warning runes in careful arcs, deeper and crisper than the old ones, and beside them, he adds something new.

Three words, cut clean across the center seam:

Breached, bled, sealed again.

And beneath it, his mark—an axe and chisel crossed behind a stone eye, the sigil he’d used only once before, buried on the underside of a forgotten altar. Now it sat in plain view, claiming the weight of what was nearly lost.

That evening, the mess hall hums with the kind of laughter that clings even to wounds.

Guards raise mugs, retelling the fight in half-truths: “I swear the tail was *this* long—ripped through the beam like it was butter.” Miners clap each other on the back, comparing bruises, holding up chipped tools like trophies. One has a black eye and no shirt but three gems in his pocket.

Golar sits near the hearth, not far from the stew line. His mug is barely touched. He watches the room swell with warmth and voices that carry pride, not fear.

Someone calls his name—half toast, half chant.

He only nods once, a quiet smile under his beard.

Later, after most have gone to sleep and the last embers burn low, he returns to Shaft D-11 alone. The wall stands silent in the dark, lamplight flickering over its fresh joints and runes.

He kneels, pulling from his satchel a small silver goblet—unclaimed from the hoard, engraved with ivy and suns, the kind used once in weddings or funerals.

He places it gently at the wall's base, just below his sigil.

“A drink for those buried by time,” he whispers. “And for those who held the stone, even in the dark.”

Then he walks away, boots quiet on the old path, as the silence behind him becomes still once more.